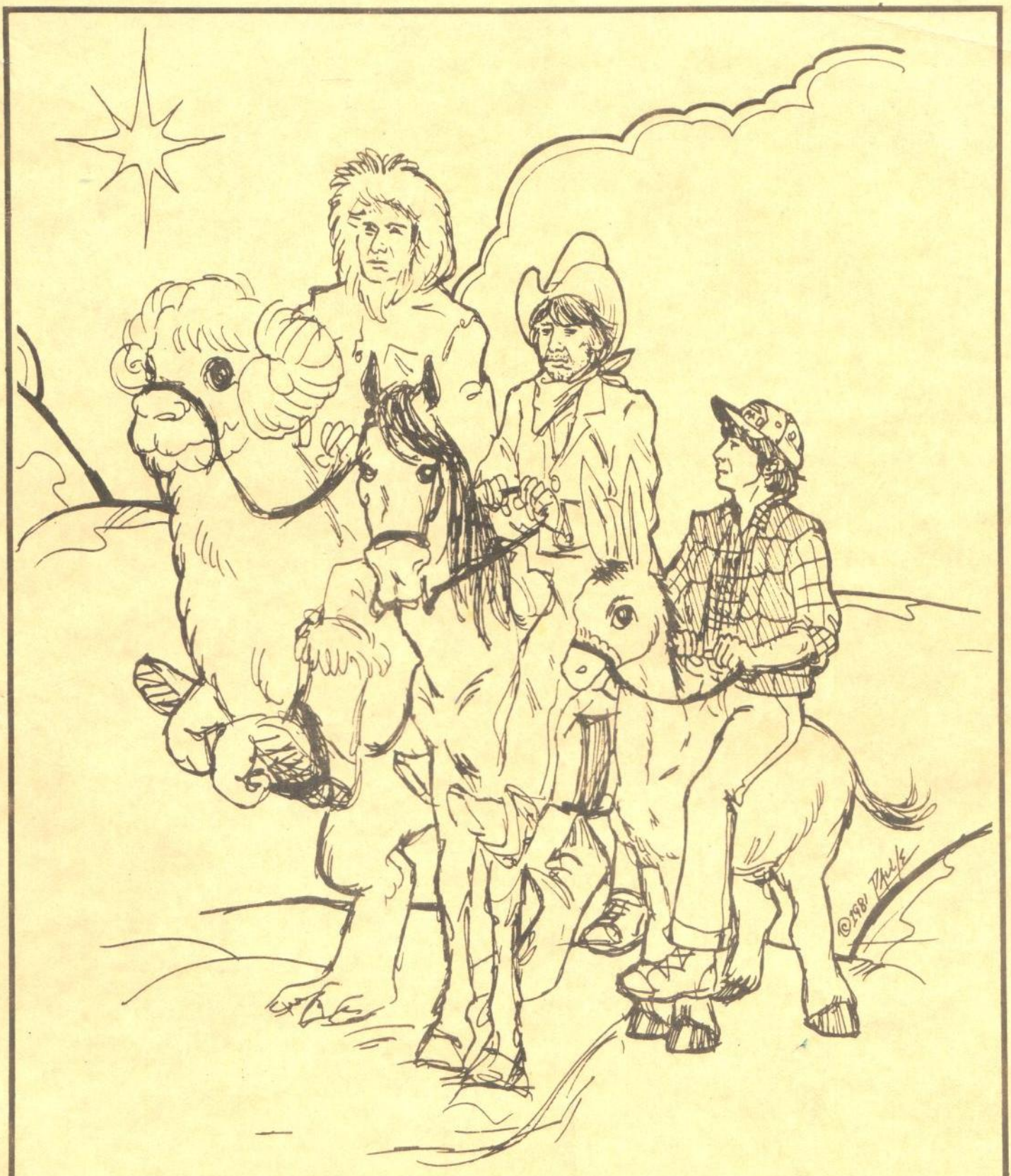

# FACETS 5

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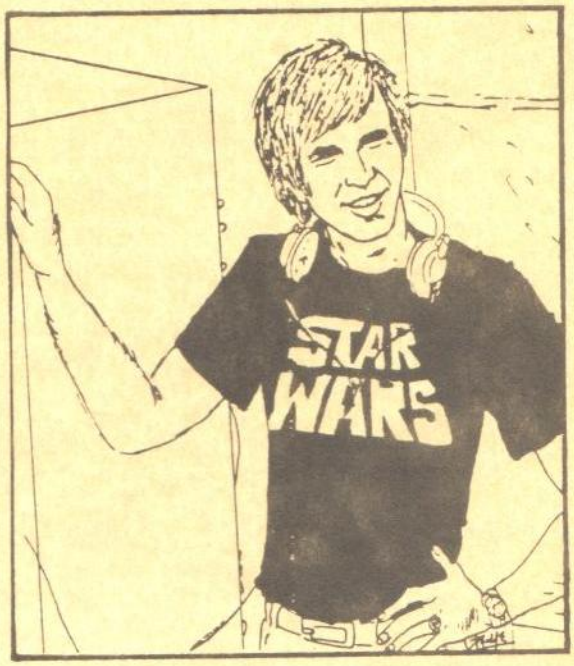


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*TABLE OF CONTENTS*


| page | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ye Olde Editorial | ye eds |
| 2 | The MarketPlace | |
| 3 | Letters of Comment | our readers |
| 8 | A Day in the Life of Han Solo<br>*illustrated by Larry Blake* | Eva Albertsson |
| 21 | Christmas 1944<br>*illustrated by Joni Wagner* | Sheila Paulson |
| 23 | Tidings of Comfort and Joy<br>*illustrated by Paulie* | Denise Sheets |
| 29 | Day of Atonement | Denise Sheets |
| 30 | A Festival in Paradise<br>*illustrated by Martynn* | J.A. Berger |
| 50 | Home for Christmas<br>*illustrated by Paulie* | Sherry Magee |
| 63 | The Life Day Carol<br>*illustrated by Gordon Carleton* | Paula Block, Judi Hendricks, Paula Smith, Jackie Paciello |
| 64 | The Way Home<br>*illustrated by Joni Wagner* | Sheila Paulson |
| 71 | Monologue of a Reluctant Angel<br>*illustrated by Xenobia* | Sherry Magee |
| 72 | Solo the Pirate Pilot<br>*illustrated by Dianne Wickes* | Meg Garrett |

Incidental art:
Paulie -- inside front, 61
W. McGuffin -- 7 & 28
Linda Stoops -- 69
Todd Hamilton -- inside back

Front Cover: "The Three Wise Guys" by Paulie


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# Ye Olde Editoral

Well, folks, every once in a while we get a case of mental aberration and decide to do a special issue. This is our holiday ish, dedicated to every holiday in the book, even if our stories deal with the winter ones. If you're sitting on the beach waiting for the Fourth of July fireworks to start and reading this to kill time, you may find it strange to be hauled into the world of snow and Christmas trees. But Christmas is more than any of these. It's love and good wishes that should extend throughout the year. So, wherever and whenever you are when you read this, Happy Holidays and may love & peace be your companions always.

A few words on the contents of thish. The SSR (sentimental slop ratio) is going to go through the roof this time but what's this season for if not to be sentimental and sloppy? For any of you who might be confused when you read "Tidings of Comfort and Joy", we refer you to MORE AMERICAN GRAFFITI. Bob Falfa grew up and became a motorcycle cop in that film. We understand a good many fen didn't see it, so we felt we should clarify that a bit. If you like the idea of a holiday ish, drop us a line if you think we should do it again next year, ok?

Editorials are kind of fun. They're the only place in the zine where the folks who put the darn thing out can say anything, so we're going to take advantage of that to comment on a few things said in the LoCs. #1 -- no, #4 was not intended to be the Chris Jeffords Memorial issue, it just worked out that way. The stories are so different that we didn't realize until paste-up that 3/4 of them were Chris'! #2 -- yes, there are a lot of typos in #4. My (Jane's) mother decided to get good and sick just as we started doing our typing and the zine got typed between trips to the Intensive Care Unit and proofed while sitting at her bedside once she got out. She's fine now, but #4 will never be the same. Sigh ...

On the subject of subscriptions -- again -- we're changing size so much that we haven't figured out any happy medium. As it stands you will be paying too much for some issues and not enough for others. Since we want to keep both our readers and our printer$ happy, let us know what you think of the present system where you SASE us and receive notice. It has worked out well so far and keeps what you are paying for the zine to a minimum.

Uh, the penpal listings went the way of all things. Could those interested parties please send us your names and addresses again?

We have been asked by Paulie to make a couple of statements on her behalf. First, she would like it announced to those who asked that she and Xenobia are the same person. Xenobia is the name she uses when doing art nouveau. And the person on the contents page of #4 (who incidentally will be a permanent fixture on that page) wearing the SW T-shirt is not Harrison. It's Lincoln Ford, twin brother of Dodge Ford, both HF clones that Paulie has invented. There is a story about each of them and if interest is shown, Paulie might be persuaded to do a small write up on them for us. Show of hands, please?

We would like to remind folks again -- when inquiring about the zine, please enclose a SASE, and even if you send one, please put your full name and address on your letter. Postage gets expensive, and frustration runs high when you can't find someone's address. We need all the help we can get to stay somewhat organzied folks, so lend us a hand, ok?

News on the Ford front: RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK has finished filming and is being edited for June '81 release. HF plays Indiana Jones, an archaeologist for a small college who 'aquires' ancient treasures for museums who aren't particular how they get them. We've only seen a story (as opposed to shooting) script, so much of what we've read will probably be changed or edited out. Nonetheless it does promise to be a wonderful film, full of derring-do and not a little swashbuckling. Just hope they leave in the part about Indy taking on a fully armed samurai with only his bullwhip -- and winning. Yes, HF had to learn to use a bullwhip for the part. I believe he also had to learn to ride a camel. Ah, the things actors go through in the name of art ....

Before we forget, a hearty congratulations to Renee Marsden and her new hubby Michael Willis, who were married on Nov. 29. Many happy years to you both!

That's about it for this time. We hope this zine finds you in good health and spirits, and once more, may the joy of the holiday season be yours the year round, whether you celebrate Christmas, Hannukah, Solstice, Life Day or whatever. Hope you enjoy!

# The MarketPlace

## SW ZINES

WARPED SPACE, Lori Carleton, 5132 Jo-Don Dr., E. Lansing, MI. 48823. Offset, reduced. Current ish #44. SW/ST/ General media zine. Many back issues still available. SASE for price and info.

TWIN SUNS, Jani Hicks, 3066D Jewelstone Dr., Dayton Ohio 45414. Offset, reduced. Current ish #2 with #1 still available. Fiction by Anne Elizebeth Zeek/Barb Wenk, Eva Albertsson & Jani Hicks, also poetry & filks. Art by Martynn, Susan Perry-Lewis, Gordon Carleton, Paulie and more. Price $6.25 + postage ($$1.50 east of Kansas, $2 west of Kansas) Also available from D'Ego-boo Press, "The Adventures of Young Han Solo" by Chris Jeffords. Ready winter '80. $2 & SASE will reserve.

KUTA PUTA, Paulie Gilmore, 117 W. Main Ct. Kalamazoo MI. 49007. Offset, nonreduced. Due out just after the holidays. SASE for more information.

TATOOINE TRIBUNE, Karen Miller, 49 Carnes Rd., Glenorie 2157, NSW Australia. #1 is about full, but they are looking for submissions of art and fiction for #2. Please do not send original manuscripts as postage costs prohibit return. Submissions earn a free copy air mailed. They also want to swap ads. Write for more info.

GALACTIC FALCON, Cindi Hartman, 3702 Fairway Pl. Rockford, Ill. 61107. #1 is due out Dec. '80. Contents include fiction by Karen Miller, Elyse Dickenson, Ellen Blair, Samantha Blackley and Melinda Ann Holley. SASE for more infomation.

TIMEFRAME, Evelyn Baker, 30 Snowcrest Ave, Willowdale, Ontario, Canada, M2K-2K7. A genzine of SF & Fantasy, SW/ST/Galactica, etc. #1 will be reprinted by March '81. #3 is now in print and contains SW, Galactica and original SF & Swords & Sorcery fiction. Price is $3 + $1.25 American postage. SASE + 17¢ for more information.

ALDERAAN, Kzinti Press, P.O. Box 8554, Toledo, Ohio. 43623. Offset, reduced. SW letterzine containing reviews, fan comments, and fine art. Sample is $1. Sub is $3.00/4 issues. SASE for more information.

GUARDIAN, Linda Deneroff, 1800 Ocean Parkway, #E-6 Brooklyn, NY. 11223. SW/ST/UNCLE/etc. Current is #3. To reserve send $3 deposit and SASE. #2 still available, $9.55 book rate, special handleing. SASE for more info.

FALCON'S FLIGHT, Ellen Blair, Box 5117, T.T.U., Cookville, TN. 38501. Photocopy unreduced. Current ish #5 already out of print. #6 due out soon and many back issues still available. SASE for more information.

MOS EISLEY TRIBUNE, Jan Sidwell, P.O. Box 40973, Nashville, TN. 37204. Offset, reduced. Current ish #4. Back issues still available. Also from MET, "Storm", a SW novel by Ann Wilson; details the fall of the Republic and subsequent rise of Darth Vader. SASE for price and info.

KESSEL RUN, Michelle Malkin, 6649 Castor Ave., Philadelphia, PA. 19149. #1 will be ready late '80 or early '81. Submissions are being sought for #2. SASE for info.

TRACKLESS VOIDS, from Millennium Press, P.O. Box 7249, Lincoln Acres, CA. 92047, is a new SW/TESB fanzine. Non-reduced photo offset, tentative publication Jan. '81. $5.00 including postage. Make checks or money orders payable to D.L. Glanzer.

## OTHER ZINES

JELLY BABY CHRONICLES, Paulie Gilmore, 117 W. Main Ct., Kalamazoo, MI. 49007. Offset, unreduced. A Dr. Who zine devoted to Tom Baker, the Dr.'s current incarnation. Meet Jeannie Robin in "The Tardis at Pooh Corner" by Peter David and join Han Solo as the Doctor makes an unexpected appearance aboard the *Falcon* in "In Loo Of" by Kelly Hill. There's lots more in this truely delightful zine. $5.50 1st class. Also in Dec. join the Doctor for Christmas in a special edition. SASE for price. #2 due out March '81, submissions are welcome.

ELOQUENCE from Panache Press is a one-shot dedicated to the career of Frank Langella and the rolls he played on stage, screen & television. Now accepting submissions of art, fiction, poetry, plot synapses, etc. Send submissions to Vicki James, 917 N. Wayne St. #302, Arlington, VA. 22201. SASE for info to Gail Paradis, 87 Leydon St. E. Boston, MASS., 02128

STORMS, a fannish feminist excursion, is looking for material. Seeking feedback, constructive advice, and offers of help from interested feminist fen. SASE Charlene Terry, 521 Oakview Dr., Dayton, Ohio 45429

DRACULA, from Lori Chapek-Carleton, 5132 Jo-Don Dr., E. Lansing, Mich. 48823. Formerly a one-shot, this is a zine devoted to the king of vampires. Offset reduced, 100+ pages, mostly devoted to Langella version, with all others welcome. #1 still available, #2 due March '81. Still taking submissions. SASE for more info.

## VARIOUS & SUNDRY

WANTED -- anything and everything on HF. Will buy, or trade for photos, many of which aren't available here in the States. Write Leonard May, Am Gerstkamp 21, 4630 Bochum, W. Germany.

WANTED -- information of HF articles and interviews for compilation of a SW bibliography. Need when published and where, with xeroxes if possible. Lita Shaldon , P.O. Box 1701, Navajo Comm. College, Tsaile, AZ. 86556

CHIMERA CREATIONS, CC Terry, 521 Oakview Dr., Dayton, Ohio, 45429. All kinds of delightful stuff -- embroidered belts, purses, shoulderbags, tote bags, wall hangings, with dragons, unicorns pegasoids and more. SASE for more info.

PHOTOS -- Elyse Dickenson, 43 Topfield Rd., Wilton, Conn. 06897. Has the most incredible photos of off-screen stuff you'd ever want to see. Mostly HF, but lots of others including Hamill, Langella and more. $1.50 each, but is willing to trade if you have something interesting. SASE for more info. (Highly recommended))

PHOTOS -- Suzanne Jenkins, 4720 NE 74th Ave., Portland, OR. 97218, has 35mm photos from HF films, TV and talk show interviews. SASE for list. Will trade for in person photos, new material (esp. foreign. Also wants soundtrack from HANOVER STREET. ((If anyone finds this gem, let us know too!))

PHOTOS, STATIONERY -- Paulie Gilmore, 117 W. Main Ct., Kalamazoo, Mich. 49007 has stationery and note cards on assorted subjects including SW, Starsky and Hutch, ALIEN, and fantasy subjects. Will also do custom pieces and commission art. Photos of various subjects, all high quality. SASE for more info. ((All items highly recommended))

((Insertions in this column are free and should reach us at least two weeks before we go to press. Deadline for #6 is March 15, 1981))

# Letters of Comment

Michelle Malkin, 6649 Castor Ave., Philadelphia, PA. 19149

The Joni Wagner drawing of Han on page 24 is spectacular! My blessings on STARLOG for the original photo. Joni is definitely one of the best SW artists there is. Kelly did a good job on Tommy's eyes on the cover. Martynn's art throughout the zine is lovely, as always, but I do wish she'd do more with her backgrounds. (( A Martynn piece without backgrounds is much preferable to no Martynn piece at all!))Whoever Xenobia is, I want her address! She's terrific! Is that crayon she's using? In fact, it looks like Paulie used some crayon, too. (Their styles are very similar.) Of course, you already know how much I Like Paulie's work.

Long Live Gortfield! I'm a Garfield fan from way back.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't like "The Riding Lesson". In this story, Han hurts an innocent animal by putting a fruit pit under its saddle, and thereby risks doing Leia a serious injury when she is thrown. Who knows how thick the snow was going to be where she landed or how she was going to land? She could have broken her neck. While Han does seem to have a well-developed sense of humor, I can't see him pulling such a risky and foolish trick. And Luke wouldn't have just laughed and thought it was a cute trick. He would have told Han off but good! "Friends" by Sheila Paulson is lovely. She has really captured the essence of Tommy Lillard in this one.

Chris' poem "The Smuggler and the Jedi" is also excellent. I've yet to read one of her poems and not enjoy it. I also enjoyed her review of HAN SOLO'S REVENGE. 'Sheila Paulson's "Echoes of the Past" was sad but fine. Writing the story in first person and having Han coming out sounding like himself is a real achievement. My compliments to Sheila.

Gordon Carleton's cartoon is, as usual, a work of art , from Luke hand and lightsabre on the floor by the tinker toys, to Han's eyes bugging out at at the blowtorch in Leia's hand -- or is it the bridal veil and wedding bouquet? I love it! I also enjoyed Sherry Magee's article on Han and his women. SW articles are so rare, and well-researched ones rarer still. Really dug your Falfa poem, Jane. You got him to a T. I'd like to see MORE AMERICAN GRAPITTI to see if friend Bob Falfa ever did grow up. And last but not least, Catherine's Strand's poem "That's Two Ya Owe Me, Junior!" shows 'a delightfully puckish sense of humor' to quote Dr. John H. Watson. Hers is exactly the kind of humor I'm looking for for KESSEL RUN.

This is without doubt your best issue to date. More please!

Ronni Sacksteder, 3066D Jewelstone Dr., Dayton, OH 45414

Sherry Magee's article I found superficial and very disappointing, pretty much a waste of five single space zine pages. I may be asking too much, or misunderstanding her intent, but there is no real analysis of character or plot and precious little of even the synopses she provides, assuming, I guess that her readership has seen every story she mentions. I for one haven't and was confused by her many passing references to this story or that poem. There has been little or no real critisism of fanfic printed (outside of LoCs) and a applaud her attempt at it, but that's about all I can say for it, she tried. As an author not claiming any special expertise other than that, I was disappointed in that the first attempt at examining SW lit seems to have been so carelessly thrown together, with a brief catalogue of story excerpts and the author's astonishment at being just barely able to descern the common thread of Han's multivarious ladies just as independent and free living as he is! That's not exactly a surprise in a universe that's been at war one way or another for forty years! I have few if any arguments with her choice of story examples, except that she seems to assume that they are all well known and some were in zines that are not that widely distributed (such as J.J. Adamson's SOLO). I just wish she had put more thought and a bit more work into her apparent effort to compare and contrast the stories she mentions, and more discussion into the article of the motivations and manipulations of the ladies and the Corellian in those stories. They are human characters (Ifound no mention of the Cat Lady) and could have been discussed in depth. I applaud the editors for printing this sort of article, though. It's an area of fanwriting that is sadly lacking and (I think) very interesting.

Sheila Paulson's "Echoes .. " is poor space opera, good soap opera. I think that says it all, since the plot is hardly believable and the Han presented is so maudlin and heartless by turns! I thought the artwork a bit rough also.

"Who Only Wait" is a comic masterpiece, perfectly matched by Cordie's cartoon. Kudos to multitalented Martynn for this and "Motives", a fine, sensitive piece, a beautiful thought verse indeed, marvelously complimented by Joni's GORGEOUS illo (from that GEORGEOUS pic in STARLOG, right?) Wow, what a dynamite match up those ladies make!

Paulie's artwork never fails and her cartoon on page 41 is hysterical! Compliments also to the eds for placing it with "Tragedy", a grim, frightening possible sequel to HEROES. Poor Kenny may just be the best HF has done other than SW/TESB.

Now, I have to know: (facetiously, please) Is this or is it not the Chris Jeffords Memorial Issue? Sigh. I loathe, despise, and ENVY people who write so much so well. "Confidences" is a lovely working of an idea I have seen touched on elsewhere, and "Riding Lesson" is fine, funny and absolutely in character. Then she goes and tackles story-poem form in "Smuggler and the Jedi" and does that better than any I've seen in some time. SIGH.

Hey, people, this zine is looking damn good, clean, carefully laid out, not a sign of harried or deadlined editing anywhere ((if you only knew!)) Kelly's portrait is to the life perfect and it reduced beautifully from the full page xerox I saw a few months back. You done good, lady editors, kudos all around.

Susan Matthews, 717 Belmont E. #202, Seattle, Wash. 98102

I think my favorite parts of #4 are Martynn's poems, Sherry's article, and Xenobia's illos. It doesn't surprise me that I like Martynn's poems -- especially her "Who Only Wait and Suffer", with its terrific Gordoncarletoncartoon. If I had the energy to rave about the artwork and material, believe me, I would. I enjoyed Sherry's article immensely (I got a sneak preview) and -- in light of the fact that she treats of some stories close to my heart -- I'm hoping she'll get good reactions in your LoCs. Xenobia's artwork was a bonus. I don't think we've seen quite that combination of fluidity, technical precision, spontaneity and character since Teanna left us. And still I don't want to fault the excellent artwork of Becky, Martynn, Paulie, and any other of your contributors. I liked the cover you yourself did; I'd like to be sure and mention that. I don't know about you, but for me drawing peoples' open mouths is the biggest challenge ever ! ((Tell me about it!)) Congratulations on Tommy. And Congratulations to you and Jane on #4 -- I'm really looking forward to #5.

Christine Jeffords, 630 Bloomfield Ave., Verona, NJ. 07044

This time I'll restrict myself to commenting on pieces related to movies I have seen, and not waste space with the rest. Taking the contents in the order found, and disregarding my own:

Beth and Sheila's poems are excellent. Each has caught the character and speech pattern of its subject with grace and skill, while Joni's illo serves as a perfect tie between them. What a delightful coincidence that you should have received and accepted both; they complement each other so well.

Martynn's "Motives" reminded me a bit of my own "After the Battle" in FALCON'S FLIGHT #5; sounds like the sort of thing Han would be telling himself -- "I can stop any time I want to" sort of talk. Joni's portrait -- fantastic! This lady has got to be one of the best SW artists around.

"Imperial Entanglements" seemed just a bit improbable as to storyline, but the characters are well handled, especially Luke with his use of the Force, an angle which I was a little surprised to see in a zine supposedly devoted to Harrison ((we like Luke, too -- if it fits in with the story, we print it!)). Paulie's illos were excellent, especially Luke on pp. 31 and 37.

"Reward": another good bit of getting into Solo's head. I particularly liked the last line -- very apt, Sheila. But "Echoes from the Past" I didn't care for. I have nothing against the basic idea of Han having seeded a bastard -- I've played with the idea myself -- but the boy being in the Rebellion at that tender age seems just a bit farfetched, and his death a variation on all those old TV westerns we all remember, where one of the regulars fell in love and the girl was killed before anything could come of it -- though I suppose Sheila felt she had to do it that way, or else end up with him flying in the *Falcon* with his father. "Who Only Wait and Suffer" expresses some of my own feelings about TESB very well. And "Free" is a good reverse treatment of "Going Home" in PEGASUS 4. Sherry's article is thoughtful and well-organized; I'd like to see a follow-up to it sometime, concentrating on the ladies with whom Han has been involved since it was written.

Martynn, Becky, Xenobia, thank you for the art for my contributions; Martynn, especially, I loved the extra little touch of having both the appropriate weapons hung over the bedpost for "The Smuggler and the Jedi". I must concede that I find a number of typos this ish -- more than you had the last time -- but far be it from me to castigate a typist for her typos. And I'm happy to see that you'll end up with an 80-to-100 page zine, especially if it continues to offer a mix of Fordian characters, and, particularly, a still-active (parallel universe?) Solo. Keep up the good work.

Sherry Magee, 3124 Wilkins Way, Carmichael, CA. 95608

When writing LoCs, it seems we're taking the role of critic, which usually means that we should ferret out comment on what we perceive was errors in the material. Alas, the only things I could find to criticize was that in my copy of FACETS the right hand pages were printed in lighter type than the left hand ones, and that there seemed to be lots of typos. Otherwise, I loved the issue. It looks sharper with each edition.

Artwork: Thought Martynn's illof for "Smuggler and the Jedi" was fine, and I was delighted that Joni Wagner is doing illos for the zine. I have long been an admirer of her drawings. Her picture of Han was gorgeous, but my personal favorite was the one of Tommy and the rabbi. It was one of my favorite shots in the film. I also love your cover drawing, Kelly. It looks almost as nice as the copy you sent me that hangs on my wall. Paulie's illos - no matter what name she uses, I love her stuff.

Poems: I knew that Martynn drew beautiful Han pics, but I'd never encountered her written material before, and I was delighted. "Who Only Wait and Suffer" was delightfully funny, nicely complimented by Gordon Carleton's illo. Leia with bridal bouquet and blowtorch was the perfect touch. "Motives" was a nice poem, too, describing Han much the way I see him - especially the part about not trying to tie him, but if you'll let him alone he'll return on his own. Actually that's pretty good advice for most relationships. I liked Beth and Shelia's two poems that contrast the rabbi and Tommy's versions of their friendships. Catherine Strand's "That's Two Ya Owe Me, Junior" was a nice mix of Han's style

with just a touch of humor at his plight. I was glad to see something on Bob Falfa. Jane's "Lettuce Farmer" was nice, told, I assume, from the point of view of the Suzzane Summers character, however, one thing confused me. I didn't remember Bob as having "golden hair" - but it fit with the idea of Falfa as a case of arrested developement. "For Maggie - 1944" was a lovely romantic look at the Halloran-Maggie relationship from a year later. What I liked best about "Free" was Luke's acceptance of the situation when he realizes he can't call Han back. Then there's "The Smuggler and the Jedi", which was probably my favorite poem, if I must have a favorite. It seemed to me a fine delination of the Han who is all smart-mouth one moment, but who can't really believe anyone who he considers to be "somebody" could love him. A very nice piece that fits into Chris' SW saga with her Jedi lady, Taze.

Fiction: Loved Jean's "Imperial Entanglements"! It's so nice to read a story that just has fun with our SW friends, but it's even nicer when the author manages to keep them in character. Also liked Chris' "The Riding Lesson". The trick Han and Chewie pull on Leia is funny (when the story was written Chris hadn't seen a tauntaun, but came very close to the mark. The tiny front legs would make it hard for the beast to buck as described, but that's a minor point.), but the best part is the idea of Han, who can handle anything mechanical, not being able to handle organic transportation. Both "Confidences" and "Echoes from the Past" were stories of a more serious sort, but were handled well. Chris' tale was one of the better night-after-the-Death-Star stories I've read. She managed to keep both Luke and Han in character. I liked the idea that Han would feel sorry for Luke, be able to comfort him, but still not allow himself to be tied to the Alliance. I thought Shelia handled her story very well. It's not easy to write about such emotional subject matter without letting the story descend into pathos. Hers did not. She kept Han very much in character.

Now for two of my favorite contributions. They weren't the longest things in the zine but they were ever so nice. One of these was "Tragedy at the Racetrack". Peggy Barilla did a fine job with this - she told the entire story in three short paragraphs. It takes me pages and pages to relate something, and the lady did the job in just a few words and an excellent newspaper style. Ken is one of my favorite Harrison characters, and I hope his future will be brighter than that, but Peggy's article certainly reminded me that there is more than one way to write a story. My other favorite was Paulie's "Aesthedic White Space". There was something about the bunny chewing on Ken's shoelace that brightened up my day. Thank you, Paulie.

All and all, I think FACETS improves with each issue, and I feel priviledged to be a part of it.

Jani Hicks, 3066D Jewelstone Dr. Dayton, Ohio, 45414.

I liked FACETS 4 multitudinous better than #3. I would like to answer a comment one of the two of you made on my LoC, though; I'm aware that FK is set during the Victorian era, but I don't think Victorian Anglicisms would have penetrated to the West Coast, and anyway certainly not into Tommy's vocabulary since he's in all probability illerate. Bank-robbers just didn't rate a higher education in those days; and even if he could read, the chance that he would read for recreation is approaching zero. And that's the only way he'd have been exposed to the King's English. ((See FK novel, page 168. Tommy is quite literate and is a word collector.))

I adored Gortfield -- one of the best-drawn cartoons I've seen you all print. And it certainly was true to the spirit of the original inspiration. Also loved the Martynn on p. 13 -- it's one of the truest-looking bodies I've seen her put on him. Usually they look just a tad too much like a half-back; this one is beautifully proportioned. Ditto Paulie's on p. 18; her Hans usually are a tad too young and this one is looking better.

Joni's Han on p. 25 is nothing short of gorgeous.

I was wondering though -- is #4 the Chris Jeffords Memorial Issue or something?

The only thing in the 'zine I really didn't like (prose-wise) was the 'Ladies'-Man' eulogy. I didn't really see any point in it at all. It seemed like four pages of concentrated ego-boo for those people whose writing was mentioned in it, and by contrast slighted those of us who weren't. I don't mind my stuff not getting in -- after all, It's hardly seen circulation yet -- but to slight Jane's stuff (besiders SPACER) and yours, and twenty other people's (there are only seven authors mentioned) and then to dwell lovingly on tripe like Nowakowska's Han -- who is totally unrecognizable to me -- and obscure stories like J.J.'s, which only have a circulation of fifty in the states, seems unreasonable.

All told, though, it's a lovely ish and more than makes up for #3.

Cat Matlock, 16888 S. Amite Dr. Baton Rouge, LA. 70815.

Thank you once again for a really good FACETS. This is only my second issue, and already I can see that every one gets better than the last. I loved "The Smuggler and the Jedi" by Christine Jeffords and "Free" by Beth Bowles. Sherry Magee's article was especially good, also. And, of course, "Imperial Entanglements" by J.A. Berger. Whew! Had to hit the cold shower after that one! Martynn's art is fantastic; the whole ish was fantastic!

It occurs to me that FACETS is unique. It's a real tribute that so many people find an actor's portrayal of his characters so real that they would devote a fanzine to them. I doubt if many fan mag's could go on just that, since they are geared mainly to the personal aspects of an actor's "real life". It says a lot for Harrison Ford, and for the people who appreciate what a fine actor he is. FACETS is not just a vent for people's creativity. It's a way of saying thank you to someone who has brought so much enjoyment to our otherwise somewhat mundane existence. Thank you again, FACETS. And especially, thank you, Harrison Ford.

Beatrix Schmidt, Box 1076, Farmington, NM, 87401.

On the subject of FACETS -- you really aren't a 15 page letter-zine any more! Still, I enjoyed this issue. Very acute characterizations in "The Riding Lesson". Leia's reaction to being tossed would have been interesting reading -- assuming, of course, you could get it on paper! "Imperial Entanglements" was excellent, especially the illo on p. 37 and Luke's use of the Force. "Echoes from the Past" I didn't care for and I'm not sure why. Technically well done, but somehow Han and kid doesn't ring true.

Enjoyed Magee's article. Beautifully structured with lots of info -- I especially enjoy articles with so many examples. It makes me wish I'd read all those zines. Strand's poem was a nice finishing touch, but it brought the point home again that we have to wait 3 years to find out what Lucas does with Han. Fortunately, we have zines like FACETS that keep him hopping all over the galaxy.

Martynn, 361 McCully St. Pittsburg, PA, 15216.

#4 maintains and in many cases improves the high standards set by previous issues. With TESB under

his belt and more accolades for a touching and extremely skilled reprisal of Han Solo and the swashbuckling RAIDERS in progress, HF should be able to regard this latest literary tribute with a less than jaundiced eye. Work is supposed to help his temperament, right? Oh, well, even if he doesn't fly East and thank us all personally, that fabled lawsuit hasn't hit and he's still cranking out the most marvelous source material (if rumors on RAIDERS is any indication) so we should all be thankful. Can't let a LoC pass without invoking his name in the usual affectionate wry humor.

As usual, too, the art is beautifully reporduced, the reduced printing clear and the layout attractive. You still might benefit from the services of a proffreader ((sigh)), but by and large the typos are not so frequent as to be annoying. I particularly liked the type of textured paper you used on the oover this time round. It reproduced the nice detailing on Kelly's excellent hollerin' Tommy well -- I recommend it by far over the slick white paper you used on my cover for #3. Very nice cover, Kelly! The mouth -- one of the most difficult parts -- is just right, and you got just enough of that very light colored beard of HF's to make him properly scruffy looking. Your technique is considerably improved!

Ye Olde Editorial contained some real insight this time. No apologies need be given for "alternate universe" SW stories because as challenging as it may be to attempt to out-guess George Lucas on REVENGE OF THE JEDI or try to fit one's story ideas completely within his framework, we of the faithful Corellian affectionados prefer as much exposure of our Hero as possible (no comments from the gutter, ladies ... ) and at the end of TESB the prospects for Han stories until Jedi would seem rather limited to "Solo's dreams in carbon freeze" and ainticipatory "rescue" stories. Better to follow Brian Daley's lead or diverge as the Thousandworlds Series; just so long as Han is kept in character.

I applaud also your statement about the overkill on the fan reaction to the Duncan Sister's case of Public Hoof in Mouth. I was admittedly surprised that you, Jane, didn't jump on the bandwagon being known for your expertise in delivering classic put downs, but those *were* of a more personal nature and the Duncans addressed fandom in general. I think a simple zine boycott on AGAINST THE SITH would have been just as effective anyway. Your tollerence is to be commended and emulated by other editors. Heck, even the Indians in the Old West knew better than to attack persons obviously not in full possession of their wits!

The LoCs were really super in #4! Aside from any little ego-boo I derived from generous compliments therein, the letters were specific, instructive and constructive in criticism and delightfully chatty. No twits write in about FACETS with'golly-whiz' comments but rather thoughtful and direct befits fen of higher intelligence. This leads me to the hypothesis that Harrison is obviously a magnet for the 'thinking' fan rather than mere groupies. Maybe it's the lingering aura of the former philosophy major about him ...

As for the regular contents of the zine -- lots of variety, just like Ford prefers in roles, it seems.

Chris Jeffords "Riding Lesson" marked my first "Empire" story to illo and it is a cute bit of fluff. My only reservation about it is my usual quibble with Chris' general portrayal of Leia and Han. The snotty nastiness of the princess and Han's constant one-upmanship with her *is* in the SW films but it has been (even in SW) tempered by their undercurrent of attraction. *Verbally*, the two are constantly fencing but Han is ever and always mindful of her as a woman, not a competor. Chris' Han & Leia, even during the practical joking, have a hard, uncaring edge to them which I would like to see softened at least in any of her stories which are published outside her own GALACTIC FLIGHT. I did very much like the touch of Chewie always picking up handy items in his pouch - the Wookiee had to to have more than just a pretty face to be running with Han! Chris' "Smuggler and the Jedi" is very obviously from her GF SW universe too and here again, while I sigh fondly over the image of Han's gentle musings over a woman he truly loves, there is just something wrong about the self-assured Corellian asking the Biblical "What is Han Solo that you should love him?" Once again, though, Chris' images apart from subtle characterization are quite interesting. I especially liked the "Sea of Dragons" reference and the 'droid with a restraining bolt" bit. Han knows his own worth, though and amply proves his love and loyalty in TESB. I don't think even a female Jedi could give him such doubts. I guess it's less a matter of style than my personal views of the characters, so I rest my case.

If Beth Bowles and Sheila Paulson did not consult on their FRISCO KID poems the set is all the more amazing for the form a perfectduo, each complimenting the other. And Joni's wedding portrait is just the right finishing touch. Sheila has Tommy's illerate venacular down well too.

Chris Jefford's versatility is evident in her thoughtful review of HAN SOLO'S REVENGE. She tells just enough of the plot to whet the appetite of any fan who hasn't had the good fortune to read the book then concentrates on praising Daley for what I wholeheartedly agree is the author's forte: the characterization of Han and Chewie. Becky's little portrait shows a nicely balanced composition.

Funny, the following piece by Chris "Confidences", came off the best, for me, of her three pieces of fiction in #4. Maybe it's because she portrays Luke well and seems to handle the relationship between him and the Corellian with a gentler touch than between Han and Leia. Solo's gruff-but-caring facade and Luke's vulnerability come across well. And of all the multitude of Han-gets-Luke-drunk pieces I've read Chris' play with the *jaco* in "Confidences" is the most believable. Zenobia's art deco illos have a lovely, pleasing harmony to them with the unifying presence of the star portal and the circular motif. The style doesn't enhance the facial likenesses, perhaps as much as some others with less contrast, but that torso on Solo on the flash page is truly inspirational!

Without contest the most breathtaking piece of art in the entire zine is that absolutely stunning Han of Joni's that faces my poem. Joni has captured the very essence of the character as he appears in "Empire" -- the depth of honesty and love to those piercing eyes and the softly ironic upturn to the full lips. It's got to be one of the best of Joni's pieces!

Now we come to my favorite bit of SW fiction in #4 -- Berger's "Imperial Entanglements". It's a clever plot despite the fact that we now know the Emperor to be a far more sinister figure since TESB. And Berger shows not only Han but Luke at their resourceful best. Even though Leia appears for only a shot time, I also like the way Berger implied that the wily princess had a viable plan underway herself. Berger highlights both the Corellian's and Tatooin's chief attributes well -- Han's inventiveness and adaptability as well as his amorous skills and wicked sense of humor; Luke's burgeoning control of the Force and his courage. The new character, Shayla, I found quite appealing; well suited to Solo in her senuality, humor and yen for worldly riches; and refreshingly different from most SW heroines in her good-

naturedly, blatantly self-centered attitude that leads her to the Imperial harem. I'd be most interested to know if Berger has any prequel stories of Shayla before the events in "IE". The real prize scene, though, is that hysterical trio between Leia, Han and Shayal where Han gives the princess a teasing guaranteed to infuriate the most placid of women, let alone the quick-tempered Alderaani. Too bad Paulie didn't choose to illo that particular bit where Leia is "assisting" Solo in divesting his boots -- it's priceless! However, Paulie's other illos are equilly delightful, especially the buxom, exotic, cat-with-canary-eyed Shayla and her Force-projecting Luke.

Your brief HEROES bits are both effective reflections of Kenny Boyd's contradictory character. Barilla's newspaper headline is sadly realistic and has a frightening amount of analogues in real life. Paulie's cartoon that that funny, lazy, eandeaing side to Ken that made the rabbithutch segment of the film so enjoyable.

Paulson's "Echoes from the Past" with Blakes's illos I really didn't care too much for, as I'm not a proponent of two-crying-towel get'ems. The speech pattern for Han was well-done, at any rate. Was this the set of illos you were going to use Leonard May for reference for Han's boy? ((Nope - hasn't been written yet)) If so, I'm afraid Blake missed the resemblance by 12 parsecs. In fact, all his resemblances are far off the mark - I think it's the off-center mouths that do it. Wish I had his facility for thos bold backgrounds, though.

Bravo! to Gordon Carleton once again for a hilarious visualisation of my little paeon to the nastier aspects of "Empire". I can't decide which is funnier: the bug-eyed Luke and Han, the princess competantly ready for a blowtorch wedding, or that forlorn severed hand holding the lightsabre among the 3PO debris. I've put in my bid with Lori for the original.

From the ridiculous to the sublime in the turn of a page brings me to Ronni's lovely, lyric "For Maggie, 1944". Doesn't sound much like the tongue-tied, down-to-earth Halloran, but the images are very beautiful. She did indeed have "crystal eyes." Sue Perry-Lewis' flawless illo bring the delicate love to life, capturing the tenderness of the moment in the adoring look in Maggie's eye and the wonderfully gentle angle of Halloran's hands -- as if her love is so fragile he is afraid to touch her for fear she could break.

I keep a clip between pp. 53 and 56 so I won't accidentally turn to Beth Bowles' "Free" or see Paulie's heartbreaking illo. Both are too competant for comfort and I can't stand to look at either because of my attachment to Han. I suppose it's a tribute to both ladies in their agonizing effectiveness but as far as I'm concerned the less said about "Free" the better. The Corellian is too much of a life-affirming character to be sent to such an early grave.

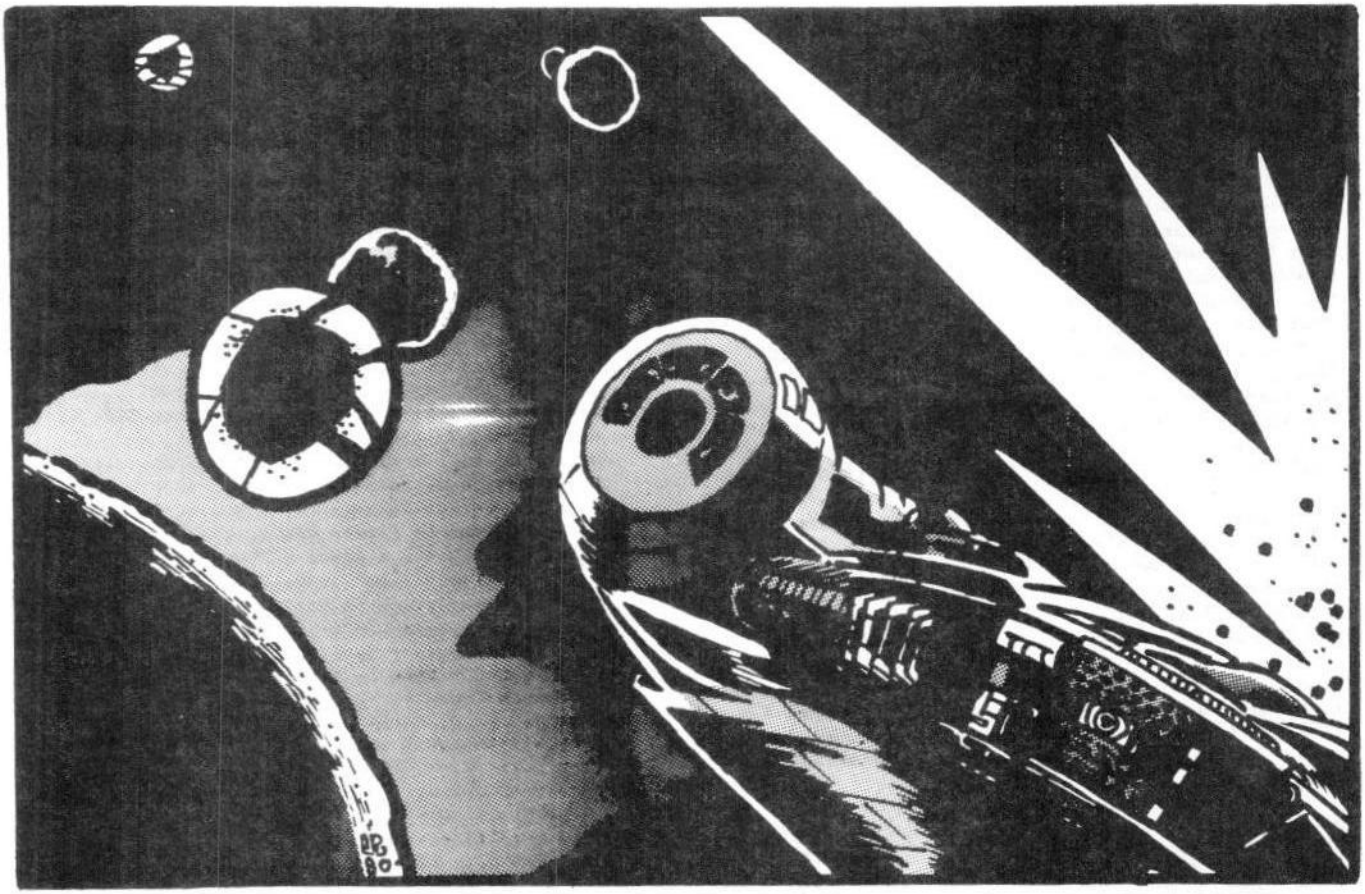
Which brings me to my other favorite piece in #4, Sherry Magee's analysis of Han Solo's way with the opposite sex. Sherry shows a lot of insight into the character, of how his appeal transcends the raffish good looks. It's amazing to consider how Sherry and all the fan writers she deals with concocted essentially the same sort of romantic profile of the Corellian all based on Ford's characterization of Han in SW, so one must assume that all the slightest nuances Harrison put in that part really came across well. And now that TESB is out we can see that Sherry and the others were right on the mark. In TESB everything we speculated about Han is revealed to be true -- he's a cheerful, vital lover (still managing a wan grin as he's led away to possible frozen death in the wake of Leia's confession); he's a tease ("There's no time for anything else!"); he's considerate (protecting Leia in the cave-in, taking her arm as they walk in the Cloud City, coming to her aid on the ship) and he's a hell of a kisser (see Carrie Fisher's comment on that in THE MAKING OF TESB: "Special Effects gave him a great mouth.") I was not familiar with JJ Adamson's stories discussed in the article but I knew all the rest and found Shrry's comments on them perceptive. That calculating Han of Paulie's is a real charmer! Talk about a come-hither look!

Jane, I love your keen, sarcastic little ode to Bob Falfa (ever notice how the name resembles Boba Fett?). So you have an inside source I've never heard or did you just make up the bit about him being a lettuce farmer? ((According to the script of AMERICAN GRAFFITI, Falfa is an agriculture major, and there was the line in the film, "A field car is what they use to drop cow shit on the fields to make the lettuce grow." Make sense?)) I think, nitpicker that I am, that bad-ass is, an you can see, hyphenated. ((Nope -- again, the script states badass is spelled as in the zine)). There's quite a good photo-analysis of the wolf-grinning dragster behind your stinging words.

And the zine is good right up to the end. Catherine Strand's "Two You Owe Me" is a fitting epilogue to TESB in perfect Solo vernacular (if occasionally cruder than warranted).

So there you have my exhaustive, respectful opinion of my favorite zine on the presses. HF should only deign to send you onethousandth that many words!

GORTFIELD



# A Day In The Life Of Han Solo


## Eva Albertsson

*illustrated by Larry Blake*


Han Solo looked at the main sensor screen of the *Millennium Falcon*. It showed a vast infinity of lightless, empty space; and just at the nethermost edge, the green, glittering rim of Kashyyyk, bathing in the soft light of a sun momentarily astern of the *Falcon*.

Han sighed. It was a beautiful sight. The more so since he had been on his way for a long time now, and there was rest and recreation at the end of the line. It was that time of the season again: Life Day, the main Wookiee holiday. Usually, he made this run together with his copilot, whose family then awaited them both dirtside -- but not this time. Chewbacca had left for Kashyyyk on a cousin's ship, not waiting for Han to complete his last run before the holiday, when the chance of a quick lift presented itself. Just to be on the safe side, the Wookiee had said . Whatever he meant by that. All right, so it *had* been a little close the last time ....

The Corellian's musings were abruptly cut off as an energy bolt danced off the *Falcon's* port shield, and another hit her square on the rear.

Han swore softly to himself. The shielding was more than adequate; he had nothing to worry about on that score, but he had rather hoped to land unobserved by Imperial scout ships, and he had certainly not expected them to spot him this soon. He returned the fire, but they stayed mostly out of range, only cutting in now and then with obvious intent of forcing him down.

Well, that was where he was going anyhow.

He complied with their wish to the extent of entering a lower orbit. Soon he would be above his intended landing point, but he doubted he could make it with these Imps on his tail. He didn't exactly wish to draw undue attention to Chewie's place. Frowning, he reached up to adjust a control on the overhead panel just as the concealed landing area passed underneath him. No go this time, obviously; would he really have to round the whole planet again? Imp probably wanted to bring him down on the main space port; now if he could only find a way of avoiding that --

* * * *

*"Arrrh."*

Chewbacca lifted his head, listening as the unmistakeable sound of starship engines passed over his roof. If it was the *Falcon* she should not have passed over at that altitude, but be on her way down into a certain clearing, four Wookiee leagues away.

With a gesture which uneasiness and sudden worry made abrupt, he pointed toward the home screen. *"Rrowf."*

On quick stubby feet his son, Lumpy ran over to turn on the screen. After the usual introductory anthems and marches that always heralded the news, whether local or planetwide, the latest victories of the occupational forces were touched up and listed, for the edification of the native population.

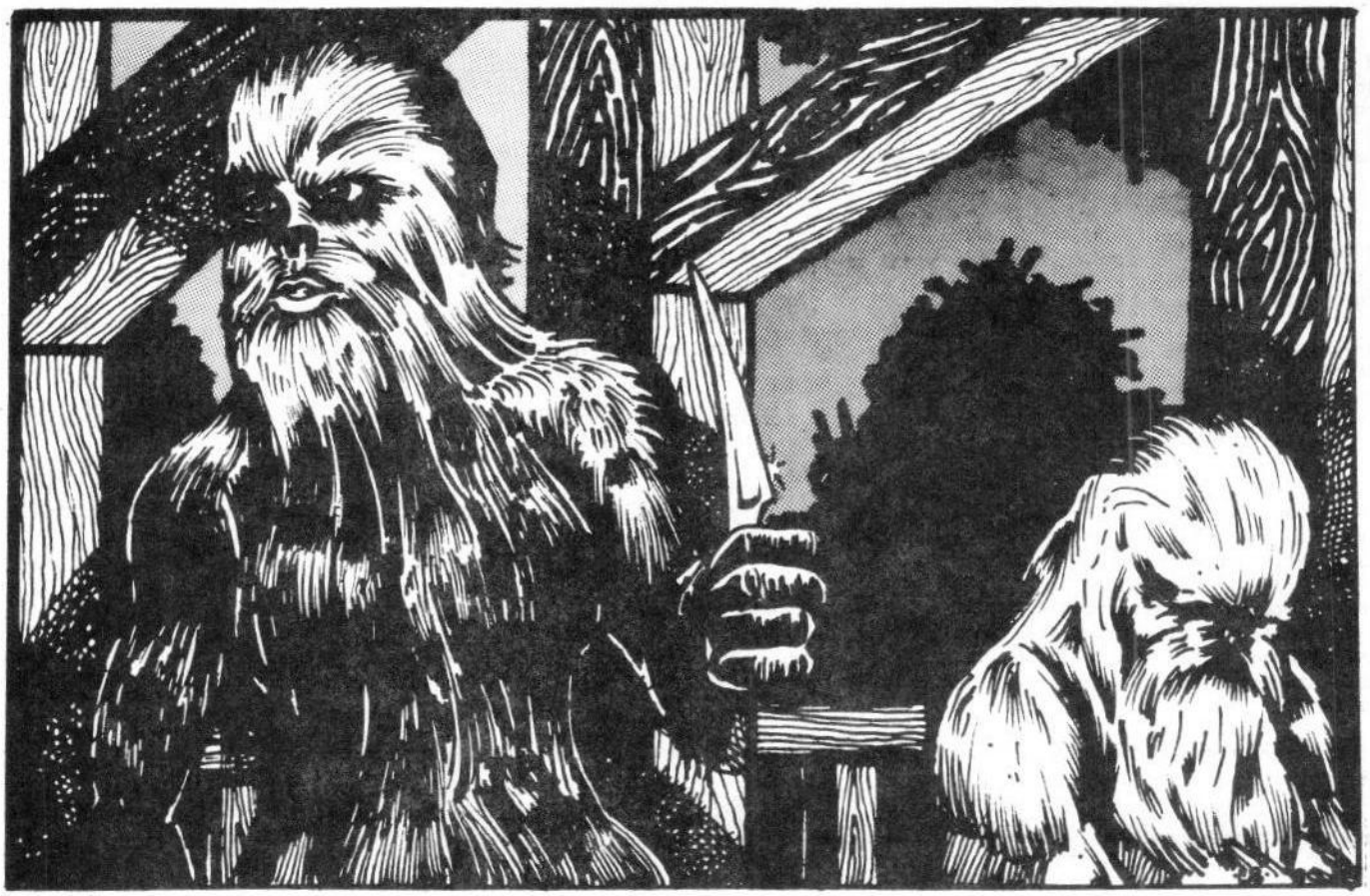
"--Mere moments ago, two of your valient protectors, each commanding a patrolling scout ship, successfully thwarted the insidious purposes of an unknown freighter, which had entered orbit against all blockade regulations, and was making repeated attempts at unauthorized landing. The valiant scouts, althought failing to gain the nearest major port, succeeded in forcing the intruder down over the North East Jungle, less than five Imperial miles from the ancient Kythian dwellings in the northern part of the district. Troops were immediately dispatched toward the area, and you can all rest assured, the capture of the intruder is imminent. Your protectors never sleep."

Chewbacca's furry arm swung out to hit a switch; the screen fell silent and winked out.

He could, of course, not be certain that the encountered freighter had been the *Millennium Falcon*, but the odds were in favor of it. He would have to find Han before the troopers did. North Kythian district, huh? It was not too far, and he knew his way well. There was a fair chance.

Getting up from his chair, he suddenly found himself nose to black nose with his wife. Malla's eyes were resigned rather than questioning. She understood what he had to do. She didn't object of course, it was just that -- As her husband completed his rise from the chair she sighed and stepped aside.

Refusing to turn around, she heard him collect his bowcaster and bandolier. Her gaze went pleadingly to his father, but old Itchy had fallen asleep in his chair. He frequently did, nowadays. Soon he would not be anything to count



with anymore. Who then would rule this house? Chewie? In name only, since he was gone more often than he was home. Lumpy? He had a long way to go before coming of age. No, she knew who, and the thought filled her with resentment and a shadow of pride. She loved her husband, but ... She was fond of his best friend but ....

Always that *but*. What did it have to mean?

It was only as Chewbacca had been gone for quite a while that the sudden silence forced itself upon her ears. Where was Lumpy? Full of misgivings, she rushed up the few steps to his room. Gone! Nowhere to be seen or heard. A quick check revealed that old Itchy's bowcaster was missing from its secret hiding-place.

Of course. Lumpy had heard the news, too. And he'd always been taken with -- that Corellian.

Suddenly, Malla knew the meaning of her *but*. And as she knew it, her rage mounted to full bloom. So now they had gotten the cub, too! Her carefree husband and his infantile friend. And her own role but to wait at home, with a placidity bordering on the imbecile. This time they had gone too far! Impatiently she tore off her apron, left it on the well-cleaned floor and went off in search of a weapon. The only two bowcasters in the house already taken, she had to settle for a carving knife.

* * * *

It was hot. Han's shirt clung to his back as he laboriously made his way through thorny shrubberies and sharp edged ferns. The forest seemed sprung directly out of the planet's early youth, never changing since, unless persistent thickening could be called a change. High season for everything green. The return of growth. Life Day. Yeah, he could tell.

A fern rapped Han across the face, leaving a would which was soon salted with sweat. He could have curse, but his supply of oaths seemed oddly exhausted. Under every tenth fern or so lay a giant sleeping constrictor. Sleeping now that the sun was mercifully beating down. Come dusk they would be quite pesky. Han's only hope lay in reaching the open before nightfall. The Imps would have guessed as much but it could not be helped. In a way, he preferred them to the constrictors.

He had sighted the Kythian district up ahead shortly before going down, and he was heading for it now. Of the ancient Kythians none now remained, though they had co-existed with Wookiees on this planet for over fifty Wookiee generations. But eventually the climate had grown too unsuitable for the delicate humanoids and with improved travel they had left for other worlds, abandoning their homes and their culture. Present-day Kythians were another people altogether, not to say peoples.

As far as Han remembered, it was the Kythian burial-grounds that were closest to the forest; maybe the catacombs could offer him a hideout. He cast an anxious glance at the low yet burning sun. Kashyyyk's day was long, but he seemed to have landed at the end of it. He wiped a sweat-soaked strand of hair from his cheek. Where *were* the damn catacombs?

* * * *

In a cloud of blue dust, Chewbacca came out on the open burial-grounds, almost simultaneously with eight Imperial stormtroopers. Luckily, they all had their backs to him, intently watching the forest on the other side behind the catacombs.

Chewie dived back into the shrubs. He did not think the soldiers had heard him.

* * * *

If Han had emerged within a comfortable distance of his prospective hideout, the troopers would have picked him like a ripe *nhaua*. As it was, with his usual unmerited luck, the Corellian came out almost opposite the catacombs, missing Chewie by mere meters of shrubs.

On seeing the eight Imperials' backs all momentarily turned against him, he grabbed his chance without thinking and started his race across the blue open ground.

The Wookiee dared not call out to him for fear of drawing the troopers' attention untimely to the made gauntlet, but he levelled his bowcaster to cover his friend when it became necessary.

It was madness, Han realized, as the eight turned as one and opened fire on him. He fired back as he ran, but one blaster and Corellian agility against eight blasters and Imperial determination just could not work. Nor would it have, had not a fierce little Wookiee cub rushed upon the scene, shooting frantically all around him, then quickly disappearing into the gloom of the catacombs.

Han registered the situation in a split second and followed Lumpy, one last shot cracking almost on his heels. Thus he never saw the sleek, agitated Wookiee female who followed close behind him, challenging the troopers as she ran, although armed with nothing but a carving knife. Nor did he hear the Imperial voice shouting, "Forget about those others! Stop her, before she reaches the graves!" Nor did he hear Chewbacca's roar as he went to battle for his family.

But he heard the two troopers dashing through the entrance, and he dived for cover as they started searching the corridors.

Outside a trooper yelled, "Don't go in, you crackpots!"

And another answered, "It's Stynn and Tonder; it's no use, they won't listen to reason."

A third: "One man and two and a half Wookiees slipped right by us. Great! This'll make some report. What do you think we'll get?"

"Never mind," said the fourth. "We can't hang around here. Terril and Leith are wounded; we've got to take them back."

Inside the tomb, not one word of the conversation was audible, mainly because of the steadily rising and falling machine-like roar that filled the passages, seemingly without any intention to cease. Electric light glared throughout the place, and Han was grateful nobody had picked the same passage as he had, in which case his cover would have offered him little protection.

Strange. He had always had a vague idea tombs should be dark, silent places, but then, he'd never been in a Kythian one. He turned round in his half-crouched position and nearly suffered a stroke as he found himself face to face with one of the inhabitants. In his first fright he almost fired at the corpse before he recognized it for what it was. Heart pounding , he forced himself to take a second look.

The creature was about two-thirds the size of a man, with slender bones and a small skull, slightly reminiscent of an almond, point down. Whether it had possessed any teeth in life was an open question, but strands and tufts of coarse, grayish-brown hair still remained on most of the body, as well as in the most unexpected places, like the huge eye sockets, whose eerie semblance of an intense scrutiny sent shivers along Han's spine. Oddly enough, there was no smell; save that of dust, incredible amounts of dust.

The Kythian was dressed in some brown tatters that could have been a shroud or its walking clothes; it was difficult to tell. It was propped skillfully if precariously in a slightly forward-leaning position against two half-open doors leading nowhere. It got some extra support from a pole under the chest, and two immense iron rings on the doors, through which it stuck a pair of elongated hands, equipped with grossly outsized claws. Han strove desperately to summon his renowned Corellian courage. Reminding himself of the more real dangers of his surroundings, he swallowed his heart back into place, gave the deceased Kythian one last stare, shuddered and moved hastily out of its presence.

* * * *

The two troopers had also encountered several of the late Kythians behind their ritualistic doors, and at least Stynn was growing uneasy.

"I don't like this," he said, glancing nervously at what appeared to be a whole Kythian family, standing behind its eldest member, who was the only one to have the advantage of the rings for its hands.

"I can't hear you over the din in here," Tonder yelled back. "You gotta shout!"

"I SAID I DON'T LIKE THIS!! WE'D BETTER GET OUT OF HERE!"

"You should have thought about that before we got in."

"WHAT?"

"LOOK AT THE SIGNS, YOU IDIOT!" Tonder roared.

The semi-open they were in, was indeed full of notices hanging above the entrances to passages leading off in various directions. The wording differed from language to language, but the message was pretty much the same: *Do not stray from ground level. Avoid down-sloping passages. Visitors are warned to keep to main floor. Do not go outside illuminated areas.*

A light yellow maintenance machine, looking much like a cross between a harvester, street sweeper and snow plow, roared past them, unconcerned about their having to jump out of its way with a very close margin. As the roar diminished, Tonder looked after the vanishing machine, noticing for the first time the circular brushes and sharp knives underneath it. He wondered idly if such knives could cut through fiberglass armor ...

"What's the meaning of it all?" Stynn demanded. There was a slight edge of desperation in his voice.

Tonder nodded toward the signs. "For tourists," he said. "I thought you knew. One of the most lucrative attractions on Kashyyyk. Run by us of course. Wookiees have no sense of business. They just left it around for ages. Didn't even come here. Didn't even keep it clean and in shape."

"Don't those machines ever shut down?"

"Not unless they bust. With all the dust in here, they are a constant necessity."

"Here's another one."

"What did you say?"

"HERE'S ANOTHER ONE. *JUMP!*"

* * * *

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Han was darting out of the path of another mindless cleaning machine -- the third in a very short period of time -- when he ran into Malla ... literally. She caught him with a roar that sounded none too pleased. "Malla! An' Lumpy ran in here ahead of me; is *everybody* here? Where's Chewie?"

*"Rrrr. Aukhee-nnh."*

"I *thought* that was how the kid came to be here. D'you think Chewie is all right?"

*"Ghhee-narhaugh."*

"Only two? I thought I had the whole damn bunch of 'em stampedin' after me. Look, Malla, why don't you -- "

*"Rrraugh! Aorrrazhee-mhnn-cheeerowrr -- "*

Han looked up at her, his eyes pleading. "Aw, Malla, honey, it wasn't my fault, not really. Not this time. I didn't ask him to go charging out on my trail, and I sure in hell didn't count on Lumpy to do the same. Now, go to Chewie and stay with him. I'll find the kid for you."

*"Rrowr?"*

"I'll start on the ground level. If he ain't there, I'll -- go on. But I'll find him."

Malla's countenance softened. After all, the little one was right. It wasn't really his fault. All he had done was try to join them for Life Day, and on her own invitation at that. And he was only Human. She gave him a warm hug -- taking care not to harm him -- and left to find Chewbacca.

* * * *

Stynn felt his heart pounding. The endless passages were getting on his nerves, and the last Kythian they had run into had been in a pretty advanced state. He tried to conceal a shudder. "Why can't we go below?" he wanted to know. "They may all be there, waiting to jump us."

"If they've gone below, we have nothing to worry about," said Tonder. "Have *we* been able to find our way out? Have we? And we're still on the ground level. Here the catacombs are still catacombs. Down below is a maze in many levels. One room exactly like the others, as far as anyone knows. There's no lighting -- every passage a dead end."

"Stop making those silly jokes," Stynn snapped.

"Who's joking? You're cracking up."

"Who wouldn't be? Look at that fellow right over there; like he was staring straight at us! But you, YOU AIN'T NORMAL! SOMETIMES I WONDER IF YOU'RE NOT A DROID!"

"ANY DROID WOULD BE BETTER THAN HAVING TO FIGHT A WAR WITH MUSHY CREEPS LIKE YOU!" Tonder shouted back.

"D'YOU THINK THE EMPIRE HAS ANY USE FOR -- LOOK OUT!" Stynn shouted suddenly. "JUMP!"

Too late. Having already raised their voices in the course of their argument, neither of the two troopers had paid any attention to the steadily increasing noise of the approaching roboticized cleaner. Stynn barely got out of its way in time, but Tonder, with his back to it, never stood a chance.

He was knocked down in an instant and swiftly drawn under the moving machine. There was a horrible, grating sound as the knives went though his armor and cut him neatly into five pieces. If he screamed it was not audible.

Stynn stood for a moment unmoving, leaning against the wall. He stared wide eyed at the mindless mechanical monster as it disappeared up the passage, leaving horrible traces behind. Apparently it was none too efficient, since a considerable amount of half-ground waste was left for another cleaner to pick up, or for the same one as it turned back. Stynn watched the leavings for a full minute without moving. Then he screamed.

* * * *

Han was racing in and out of passages on the lookout for the troopers as well as for Lumpy. Methodically, if a bit rushed, he was searching out the main level first, not really wanting to think about the moment when he would decide the cub must have gone below.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. What was that on the floor up ahead? Curiously, he moved closer.

It was the dust-covered, halved body of a child.

Fighting his reactions, the Corellian knelt by it. That it was no Wookiee was obvious enough, but that was not much of a relief since wild images of tourist tragedies chased eachother through his brain. Then he saw the over-packed funereal doors close by and understood. A Kythian kid, dropped from its propper tomb into the path of of a less-than-perfect maintenance machine.

All the same, Han did not want Lumpy to see this. He listened closely for the sound of an approaching cleaner, but the din - though still loud - seemed only to fill the passages at the same vague, unchanging distance. They were never there when you really needed them. Han forced himself to look back to the body. If he had to carry

it out to a machine-- He could not quite make out if the halves were still connected somehow or not, and he was not all that eager to find out.

The sharp crack of a blaster shot and a searing pain in his back brutally called his attention back to his surroundings. Unable to move quickly, he dragged himself into some sort of semi-cover of the kid's toumb door and drew his blaster.

On seeing his assailant, Han immeadiately knew why he was still alive. To anybody who had faced the well disciplined, machine-like Imperial Stormtroopers, it was obvious tha the white-armored figure outside the passage had had one experience more than he could really take. He was stumbling erratically about, looking helplessly at the numerous paths leading in all directions; still knowing enough to shoot when he saw the Corellian, but no longer able to take aim properly, and even oblivious to the wide main entrance right behind him. He had groped his way out of the catacombs, but he did not know it.

Han imagined the wild eyes under the white helmet and almost wished he could tell him. Not that it would do much good. The guy was probably past listening. The Corellian changed his blaster over to his left hand in order to get in a clear shot. The door was blocking his right one. He would never have lived to maturity had he not been ambidexterous.

But someone else shot first. A bowcaster charge grated harmlessly against the white armor of the soldier's right foot, raising a cloud of blue dust. As the trooper turned, a whirlwind of dusty fur darted across the open area, straight into Han's intended line of fire.

In an unexpected burst of co-ordination, the Imperial grabbed the Wookiee cub, disarmed him, and turned his own aim on Han, all in one fleeting moment; then he disappeared into one of the downleading passages dragging the kicking cub with him.

A cleaner dutifully consumed the discarded weapon.

* * * *

It was Chewbacca who found his wife, rather than the other way around. Seeing her running along a passage at right angles to his, he stretched out an arm as she drew level and hauled her to him.

*"Grrowr-akhgnn?"* he demanded sternly.

She stared back defiantly. *"Rrrowf."*

Suddenly reminded of his son's venture, Chewbacca glanced about him worriedly. He had been through most of the illuminated area; to go beyond that was madness. But they had to find the child.

*"Wrrm-aroo,"* Malla reassured him.

Chewie relaxed slightly. He had great confidence in Han's ability to find Lumpy -- or die trying. He made a swift decision. The best thing was probably to find the entrance and wait there until Han, Lumpy or more stormtroopers showed up, thus giving the Corellian a chance to locate the youngster without everybody losing track of each other again.

Malla ostensibly approved of the plan, but her eyes told him she was not going to wait long. Two hours at thè most, and she would go below herself.

* * * *

Han stared directly up into the empty eyesockets of nightmare, leaning over him from an otherwise purposeless doorway. One of the hands was hanging so low through its ring that the claws almost touched his face. He shuddered and closed his eyes.

He way lying on his sore back in the dust of a down-leading passage. Up ahead, from whence he had come, was still light; down behind his head was darkness. They were left in a perfect, effective penumbra, he and the Kythian. He did not feel like looking again.

He knew where he was, all right, but his memory of how he got there was more diffuse. All he recalled was searching endlessly for Lumpy until he collapsed in the blue dust, numb with throbbing pain.

The pain ... As his hand brushed against a hard metal box, he remembered the medikit. He had taken that and a lantern from a depot for tourists, near the main entrance. Unfortunately, he could not make much use of the medikit, his wound being out of reach. He would have to find Lumpy first. If the kid was still alive ....

Han tried to get up but fell back with a groan. One thing was clear: the wound would not let him move fast. He sincerely hoped he would not have to.

A waxing thunder forced him to open his eyes despite the Kythian's looming presence. He stared incredulously at the approaching cleaner. It seemed that machines could get lost just as well as people. Somehow he had taken for granted that they would keep to the tourist area. But here was one, roaring in his direction, although this off passage was barely wide enough for it. He would have to get out fast.

Fast. He made a new attempt, but it was futile. His back was stiff, and hurt so bad he was afraid he would pass out if he tried again. Helplessly, hc watched the machine's steady approach.

* * * *

Chewbacca had been right in his guess. Toward the end of the two hours, Malla was becoming intolerably resolute. She was fuming at him for not going down, but he knew well the dangers and held her back. Darkness had fallen outside long ago, but he was determined to wait if he had to keep her there all night.

Only when he was quite sure Han could not handle the search on his own was he going down. Alone. He did not quite know how to break this to his wife; he wished he could have sent her home first, but after dark that would have been equally dangerous, if not worse. The constrictors were awake now, and hungry.

And, looking at Malla, he was ashamed of his thought. Wanting to send her off like an encumbering package, when he ought to be grateful for her courage and her determination to share these hardships with him. In fact, he was beginning to notice hitherto unknown qualities in her.

But still he was not prepared to risk losing her in the murky mazes below.

* * * *

Han drew his blaster and waited. He would not get away from the machine, so his only chance was to stop it. Unfortunately the only way of getting at its inner workings seemed to be from underneath.

He watched it coming, noisily, slowly -- and inexorably. If it had some protective plating on its underside too, he was likely to be the first Corellian ever to wind up in a *Kythian* tomb. He darted a quick, resentful glance at his prospective room mate then turned his attention back to the cleaner.

Sensing some obstacle, the machine lifted its heavy knives over Han's body, disrespectfully flattening the ancient Kythian against the wall by closing the doors on him. Han aimed carefully at a narrow slit behind the foremost blade. As the knives began their descent he fire, sending out a fleeting thought to the Force not to be exactly *against* him.

It was not. Or else, Corellians were just *born* lucky.

The beam neatly severed a few leads and melted a fuse, bringing the machine to a halt. Quickly Han rolled aside, trying to get out from under the knives before they struck. The sudden movement caused him to pass out.

* * * *

Stynn sank down on the floor of the passage, his back against the wall. His prisoner made a furtive attempt to get away, but the Imperial pulled him down into his lap to keep track of where the cub was in the dark. The high spirited little Wookiee bit his hand hard. He cuffed the child almost disinterestedly.

He was tired. He did not know how long they had been groping around in identical passages, breathing dust. His earlier panic had worn off him now, and by now he had run into so many Kythian bodies in the dark that he was past fear.

The kid did not seemed frightened in the least. Stynn wondered idly if that would have been true if the youngster had been alone.

But truly, Lumpy was not afraid. Although his first encounter with the small corpses had left him rather ill at ease, he saw no actual reason to fear dead humanoids. And there was no nauseating smell to disturb his sensitive nose. Still, he sensed Stynn's fear, which exhilirated him. He'd show the rotten Imp what it was like, dealing with a real Wookiee! Oh, just wait till he got home and could tell his father all about this. Chewbacca would be proud of him. And Han! Never for a moment did he doubt that he would get home. Had be been alone, the impenetrable darkness and the endless passages might have gotten to him -- but he was not alone. Deep down he sensed something about his captor; something important. Imperial Stormtroopers, in Lumpy's experience were anonymous, machine-like killers, fearsome -- and many. This Imp was only one, and far from being fearsome, he was fearful --

All defiance for his enemy, Lumpy never realized he was actually appreciating the company. He did not bother to sort it out. With a child's general acceptance of life's intricacies, he had simply decided that stormtroopers were soldiers -- this was a person.

* * * *

Han awoke to find himself pinned. One of the descending knives had caught his hair and, the edge being just a fraction too wide to cut anything that soft, had just pushed it into the blue dust and held it. The dust had settled everywhere. It was difficult to breathe.

Han wished he could cut off the captured locks, but he did not particularly care to aim a blaster close behind his head without looking. In a slow, agonized movement, he raised his arm and began working the strands out from under the blade.

It seemed to take forever to escape. First, there was the struggle to free his head, then rest; then the agonizing crawl to collect the medikit; then rest again; then the worst part, getting out.

Luckily no other parts of him were caught, though his left foot had had a narrow escape. The lantern lying next to it had not fared so well. It lay completely mangled under a heavy wheel. The way out to the main floor was completely blocked.

Slowly, Han managed to worm his way past the front end of the machine and stood for a moment leaning on it, panting heavily. Then he lifted his head, pushed off from the cleaner, and started on his way down, into darkness

* * * *

Wearily, Stynn removed his helmet, placed it beside him, and wiped the sweat from his face. Sitting here in the dark with an inimcal being, whose language he did not understand, and with no chance of getting out, was not exactly his idea of time well spent. And he knew his superiors would agree. Not that it mattered; his chances of having to report this were infinitesimal.

Suddenly a thought struck him. He might not understand Wookiee, but the cub sure understood Intergalactic. What if the kid knew something?

"Hey, Fuzzyface, you don't know a way out of here, do you?"

No answer at first, then the youngster took his hands, putting them to his furry head which he gravely shook. The gesture didn't come quite natural to him, but he imitated it as best he could.

Stynn sighed in audible disappointment. Then he thought of how unbecoming a sigh was in one of the Emperor's soldiers. "You understand I'm only keeping you here as a hostage?" he told his prisoner -- and himself.

*"Hostage for what?"* the young Wookiee thought.

* * * *

Alone in the dark, Han had run into something. He did not have to grope around too much to figure out what it was. He felt his skin crawl as he disengaged himself from the dusty embrace of the dead Kythian. He wouldn't have called it fear, exactly, but he was experiencing a certain -- tension of the nerves, anyhow. As he tried to move away from the corpse the thing lurched forward, following him. The Corellian screamed. Then, as his reason told him what must have happened, he gingerly removed the long strand of eyesocket hair that had gotten lodged in his belt. He felt his stomach turn but fought it. There were real dangers here.

As if in confirmation of his thought, the ever-louder roar of a lost maintenance machine was heard. The cleaner was doubtlessly approaching, but the sound reverberated through the numerous passages, and it was hard to determine the direction. Since it had gotten down there by mistake, it had no lights, and was just as invisible as everything else.

It had gotten pretty close before Han realized that it was actually behind him. He tried to sidestep -- and fell.

And kept falling, rolling down a slope of some sort.

Lying at the bottom of what must be an off passage, and hearing the machine thundering by far above his head, he marvelled at his luck. There had to be something to these rumors about Corellians, after all.

Many passages later, and five levels further down, Han thought he saw a flickering of light. His head was swimming from recent experience as well as from keeping his attention on the ever present, waxing and waning sounds of the cleaners' engines.

So now he was seeing things, too. All the same, he drew nearer .

* * * *

*"Chree-szhh!"* Lumpy protested vehemently, while performing an enraged dance around the blaster-lit flames.

"I don't care what you think about my irreverance," Stynn said as he gathered a family of Kythian mummies further into the fire. *If only I don't fall asleep*, he thought.

He added the doors, then turned to the still frantic cub. "What are you screaming about?" Suddenly he remebered how, earlier, the kid had firmly held his hand to his little belly, and thought he understood. "I know you're hungry. So'm I. There's nothing we can do about it, though ."

A deep-throated laugh interrupted him. Swiftly, he grabbed the young Wookiee and drew his blaster. Then he looked up into the muzzle of the Corellian's pistol, and wondered why he hadn't been shot.

"He doesn't want you to build that fire," said Han. "He's concerned about your oxygen supply in here. He's right."

He took a step forward and the stormtrooper raised his weapon. Han looked at his blaster, then back at the young, nervous face. This Imp must be some fifteen years his junior, if not more. The straw colored hair was streaked with sweat and blue dust, and his pale blue eyes betrayed his weariness.

Suddenly and irrationally Han was reminded of Luke Skywalker, and he lowered his gun.

"I can get you out," he said, "if you don't shoot me."

"The Imp awarded him an incredulous stare. "Why would you do that?"

Han grinned painfully, holding out the medikit. "For a bit a treatment," he said. "Y'see, my wound's in the back, and I can't reach it. "Ill never make it all the way to the outside if I don't get it tended, and you won't make it without me. Deal?"

"You really think you can get us out?"

"No. I know I can."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

Han shrugged, and wished he hadn't. The pain was fierce now.

The trooper put away his blaster. "All right, I haven't got much to lose. Let's have a look." Han Holstered his weapon, handed over the medikit and tried to remove his shirt. It stuck. Stynn saw him bite his lip, and knew how he felt. "Scream if you must," he said calmly, and opened the box. Han glared at him.

It was not easy. It took time, and the little Wookiee fell asleep in a corner, tired from watching.

Washing the shirt away and cleaning the wound went fairly well -- the wound was not deep -- but there was not nearly enough synthflesh in the kit to cover all the scorched area. For the first time the young trooper had some insight into the time-consuming work and difficulties of amending the suffering that was so easily inflicted.

For a moment he was at a loss what to do. Then, remembering that he had brought this on himself, he clenched his teeth, synthfleshed as much as he could, and decided to put an old-fashioned bandage on the rest. The Corellian's shirt was pretty useless now anyway; he could always tear .... He eyed the grimy shirt. If he put that on the wound, he would only succeed in undoing all his efforts, and quite likely the guy would drop before ever reaching the ground level.

Resolutely, Stynn took off his protective armor, and began ripping his own shirt into shreds. Han knew better than to comment.

* * * *

"I thought you knew your way out."

"I do. And it's quite a bit yet," Han retorted.

"You said that several levels go."

They had set out as soon as possible, which meant after catching some sleep by an extinguished fire; the menacing roar of the cleaners rang in their ears and haunted their dreams.

"If you're so keen on getting out, how come you went down there in the first place?"

"There were two giant Wookiees after me. The kid's parents, no doubt," Stynn reflected.

"They weren't after you. They never knew you had taken him. Why did you?" Han asked interestedly.

"Hostage, I guess. So's not to get shot."

"In the dark? "

"No, I just landed here with him; running from the two adults." Stynn tried to defend himself from the amusement he sensed in the Corellian's voice.

"But you still kept him with you. Why?"

No answer but the very darkness, impenetrable as a wall. Perhaps that was answer enough.

Han smiled into the darkness as he walked from passage to dusty passage, eyes closed so as not to get distracted by imagined visions, judging distances by sensation; ever climbing toward freedom, as if drawn there.

The sound of the cleaners began to fall back, and soon it was heard only as a distant murmur. The passage grew quiet -- too quiet. Han suddenly realized he had neither heard nor felt Lumy at his side for quite a while. A growing sense of constriction in his chest, Han quickly felt around him. No Lumpy. He stopped. *"Arrooo-rrowf,"* he called softly.

Stynn had stopped, too. He looked about him, as if that would help. "Where's the kid?"

"Don't know," said Han. "I tried calling him earlier, but he doesn't answer."

"Was that what you were doing? I thought you were choking on some dust."

Momentarily forgetful of the darkness, Han shot a glare in the Imp's direction. Just because some people didn't understand the most elementary Wookiee -- Though he had to admit that his pronunciation left much to be desired.

"He should be here somewhere," said Stynn. Suddenly he let out a scream. Groping around for Lumpy he had laid his hands on a deceased Kythian, feeling all over it before realizing his mistake.

"What the Sith happened?" said Han, shaken. The Imperial's scream had caused him to jump a couple of feet, but he did not care to admit it.

"If you mean, 'what the whole Jedi Pantheon happened'," said Stynn, " the answer is, nothing in particular."

"That what you guys use for a favorite curse?" Han asked interestedly.

"Oh, there are others. Like, 'it's black as a Rebel's asshole in here'. And 'dirtier than the roots of the Alliance."

Han pondered that. Then he said, "Just for the record, the Jedi never had a pantheon."

Stynn laughed. "They did, and it was full of saints. Self-styled ones."

Han felt oddly bewildered. Speaking to Luke, he might have said something like that himself. Also he sensed that Stynn was merely voicing his beliefs, with no real insult intended.

He decided to change the subject. "We should be seeing some light soon," he said.

"Oh? I may not know which way I came, but this is definitely not it; that much I can feel. We're not anywhere near the main entrance."

"Well -- " Han had to admit, worriedly. "Who says we have to leave the same way we came in?" he finally said, with a confidence so transparant that it jarred on Stynn's ears.

Suddenly, a ball of excited fur landed in Han's arms, and a stream of Wookiee chatter was heard in the passage.

Han grinned in the dark. "What'd I tell ya? He says there's light up ahead."

"What has he been up to?" Stynn asked gruffly.

*"Rrowf-ee."*

"He just went to the bathroom," Han translated.

* * * *

Emerging from a side entrance half hidden by shrubbery, they stood for a moment, blinking against the early morning light. Then to two men looked at each other, both suddenly wary.

Here was where their deal ended; what now? They stood squinting at each other, awash in the brilliance of a new day; both naked to the waist, except for Han's makeshift bandage, and streaked with blue dust.

Lumpy's eyes darted quickly from one to the other without a sound escaping him.

"Well," Han said at length, "where do we go from here?"

A deal was, of course, just that -- a temporary agreement, a truce. But somehow he could not seriously claim they were enemies anymore, either. Unless the Imp made a false move of course ....

Stynn shrugged. "Don't know. I can't very well go back to my regiment, can I? They'd mince me."

"Yeah, that don't seem very rational, does it? I mean, after all the trouble you had, getting out of this tomb. D'you really owe the Emperor anything? Or Vader, for that matter?" The youth shook his head. "Well, cast off then, go independent."

Stynn looked doubtful. "I don't know how. I've been a stormtrooper for a long time, since I was big enough to fit into armor. Before that I was trained for it, and for little else. Somehow, it's my life."

"That trigger-happy, huh? Well, join the Alliance, then. They'd be only too happy to get one more kook to order around."

Unexpectedly the youth did not bridle. Instead he smiled and slowly shook his head. He had an engaging smile.

"I'll think of something," Then he frowned. "One thing I don't understand. Why didn't you shoot me or lose me long before reaching any exit? I mean, you could get out, once I tended your wound."

Amazed, Han met the ice-blue gaze. Thoughts swirled around in his head of Luke' of his own early youth; of his pirate's honor as a Corellian; but somehow he found no words to explain it all. He smiled.

It's Life Day," he said. "Maybe I honor traditions. Besides, why didn't *you* shoot *me*, once we spotted the exit?"

Stynn spread his hands. "Why should I?" he said simply.

*"Mmmh,"* Lumpy pointed out, as they watched the young ex-Imperial disappear in the direction of the Kythian dwellings.

"The day after?" Han said in mock surprise. "Why, so it is!"

* * * *

After walking around a fourth of a burial grounds, Han and Lumpy arrived at the main entrance. Outside in the morning sun sat a tired Chewbacca, his wife asleep in his arms.

Rousing her rather abruptly, he sprang to his feet to embrace his son and Han.

*"Mmmm?"* he enquired, overjoyed.

Through dust an a light stubble of beard, his friend flashed him a weary grin.

"Thought I told ya. Corellians *can't* get lost."

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FACETS PAST AND FUTURE

#3 -- less than a dozen copies left, and there will be no reprints, so for anyone who still doesn't have it and wants it, the time to order is now. $3.45 first class, 42 pages offset. Contents include "What Man Has No Knife?" by Lisa Adolf, and poetry, articles and other goodies by Sheila Paulson, Chris Jeffords, Jani Hicks, Beth Bowles, Sherry Magee and many more. Art by Martynn, Paulie, Bec Aulenbach, J. Rafferty, Lisa Mason and more.

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#6 is due April '81. SASE for final price after March 15. Contents include "Occupational Hazard" by Eva M.E. Oslo, "An Honest Job", part one by Elyse Dickenson, "Home is the Hunter" by Kelly Hill, "A Bad Case of Corellian" by J.A. Berger, "Second Time Around" by Chris Jeffords, plus poetry by Sheila Paulson, Lynne Terry, Tammy Monfette and Susan Matthews. Art by Martynn, Paulie, Larry Blake, Tammy Monfette, Stephanie Hawks, Bec Aulenbach and many more. Artist are still needed -- deadline March 1. — PRICE $7.90 1st $7.40 3rd

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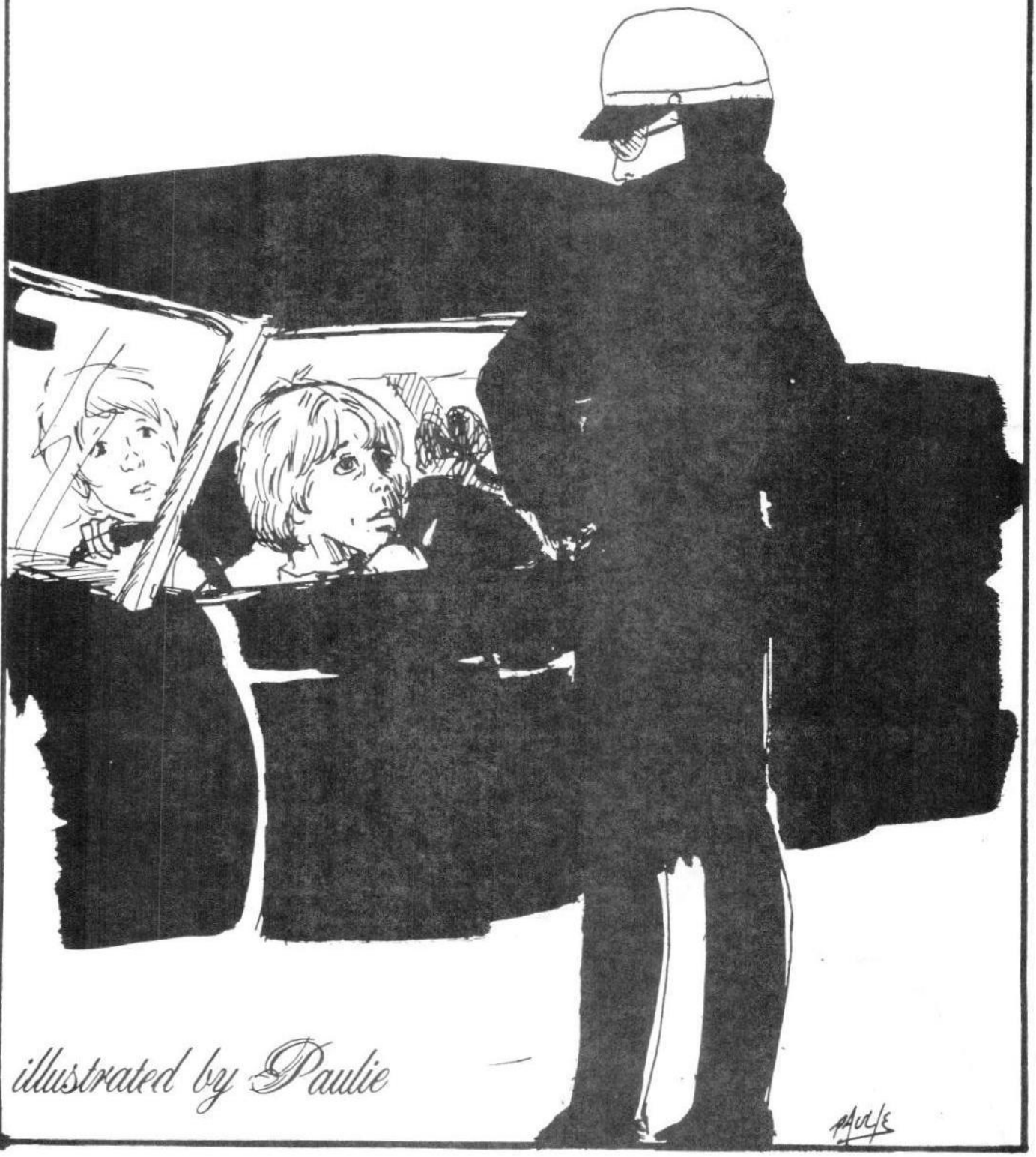
# Christmas 1944

## Sheila Paulson

Back in Chicago, it'd probably be snowing.
It doesn't now much here, though.
And even if it did, it still wouldn't seem like Christmas to me.
It isn't just the war so much,
Or even being away from home.
It's knowing that I can't be with you
No matter how much I want to.
I've taken to walking down your street when I'm in town.
Once I saw you, but I kept out of sight.
I know that I'm not strong enough
To walk away from you a second time.
But it's Christmas,
And I want to see you, even if it's only from a distance.
Other people are singing carols and buying Christmas gifts.
I want to give you something, too,
But I know the best present I can give you
Is to stay out of your life.
Merry Christmas, Maggie.
May all your dreams come true.

# *Tidings of Comfort and Joy*

**Denise Sheets**



*illustrated by Paulie*

Officer Bob Falfa was totally without holiday spirit this Christmas. It was the damn, silent aloneness that did it to him. Sure there were carols in the air, but they were just there whether anybody listened or not. There were crowds everywhere, crowds of strangers. They aggravated the hell out of him this year. Because they had someplace to go and somebody to go to. Like his buddies. They had someplace to go, too. They had somebody-- Oh hell, big deal. Somebody to go to. Yeah, right. A nosy mother; a pushy sister; a nagging wife; loud snot-nosed brats who made like the Mongol hordes at 4 A.M. Christmas morning and totalled out the living room by 4:15-- and laughed and squealed with excitment and hugged and wanted him to play Chutes and Ladders and-- God damn, he missed the kids more than was logical considering he'd see them later, after they got back from their grandmother's in Sacramento. Janie was real good about letting him visit. So on Christmas morning he could sleep as late as he wanted, read the paper, even have a beer if he wanted--no mess, no Chutes and Ladders, no laughing, no hugs. Silence. Aloneness.

The old Chevy screeching into the deserted parking lot interrupted his thoughts. For that he thanked the driver, for that and for something to do. He pulled the car over in front of the Sears store and treated himself to a cliche right out of a 1930's cops and robbers film.

"Goin' to a fire, kid?"

The driver looked all of 17. Falfa hoped he'd be a smart-ass kid. He was in the mood to come down on somebody real hard.

"Let's have the license, kid."

"O.K. Sure." The kid began to dig for his wallet in a series of wild contortions brought on by nervousness and very tight jeans. The other kid in the car, 14 maybe, and looking too much like the driver not to be his brother, just stared big-eyed. Finally the contortions ceased and the driver's license appeared.

"We're goin' to our mom's officer. We got her a present. She don't live with us and we want to give her this before she goes outa town."

Falfa looked in the backseat and winced. It was the ugliest Christmas package he'd ever seen. It had a big, sickly purple bow planted off-center on a garishly printed red and green and silver foil. In one corner was a clutch of sparkly white bells, in the other a blob of plastic holly. There had to be at least a half a roll of Scotch tape on it and even so the ends were coming loose. It was a package only a mother could love and she probably would. Tony and Diedre had come up with a few beauts and--

"It's a can opener and slippers," the younger boy suddenly offered. "Fuzzy slippers. Pink."

Falfa almost laughed. This had to be for real. Nobody could make it up.

"O.K." he said, "Get going. Slow."

"Yes, sir."

He watched them drive away and shook his head slowly. God, what a present. Sure nothing like the neat little package that was delivered to him yesterday. Inside was probably something as tasteful as the outside. Janie had great taste and neat handwriting. Those two boys probably could hardly scribble. But at least they tried. The scribbling and the frightening wrapping and the strange gift combination. They tried. He hoped their mother appreciated it. He would have, even if it was a pair of fuzzy pink slippers.

A carillon somewhere was clanging "Joy to the World" into the damp darkness. He wanted to laugh and he wanted to cry and he knew damn well he'd better not do either one.

He got back on his motorcycle and put his foot on the starter. Just before the motor roared to life he heard:

"Santa. Santa."

No, it wasn't real. Just an echo of those damn bells. Joy to the world. Joy to whose world? Not to his, that was for damn sure.

But he shut the engine off anyway.

"Santa, where are you? I want to talk to you."

He looked around and finally found the owner of the little voice. A kid in a red-hooded jacket was pressed against the locked door of the Sears store pounding on the glass and peering into the darkened store. Falfa got off his motorcycle and walked over to the little kid.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The kid jumped and turned. Falfa could see now that it was a little boy about Tony's age. Besides the jacket all he was wearing was a pair a yellow pajamas and slippers with football players on the toes. The night was not bitter, but it was too chilly for just pajamas and slippers.

"Does your mom know you're out?"

"No, sir." Tears began to well up in the boy's blue eyes as he stared up at the fearsome, helmetted figure.

Falfa squatted down to be more on the boy's level. The kid was upset enough without feeling like he was being hovered over by a wicked giant.

"What's your name?"

"Stevie. Steven Randolph Kimbell."

"Mine's Bob. What're you doing here? It's past your bedtime."

"I had to see Santa Claus. I forgot to ask him something. He lives here. I saw him."

"Well -- er -- he don't really live here. He just visits for a while. Hel -- heck, he went back to the North Pole around four o'clock to get his sleigh ready and change his clothes."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Oh." The kid looked sad. "Then he won't know .... "

"Ah, sure he will. He knows everything. When you talked to him he could hear your inside voice telling him what your outside voice forgot. That's Christmas magic. You know Santa's magic, don't you?" The story sprang easily to his lips. He made up that bit about the inside voice back when Deidre was four and threatening to do what Steven Randolph Kimbell had done. She bought it. So, thank God, did Stevie. He nodded seriously.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right." He grinned.

"Want to go home now, Stevie?"

"Guess I better."

"Where do you live?"

It was almost a mile away.

"You walked that far?"

"I had to see Santa." Obviously Stevie felt that explained everything.

"I'll take you home. It's getting late. You'd better be hustling back to bed before he gets to your house."

Stevie scanned the sky thoughtfully. "Yeah," he agreed. "He won't like it if I'm awake."

Falfa called in about finding one Steven Randolph Kimbell roaming around. There was no report of a missing boy in the area. Apparently his folks assumed he was safe in bed.

On the way home Stevie sang Christmas songs and recited a very original version of "Twas the Night Before Christmas". He was unabashedly happy about Christmas.

Apparently his folks had the Christmas spirit too. There was a big Christmas tree in the window and lights strung over the front gable and all over the bushes under the front windows. Falfa thought of all the sore fingers and curses as colorful as the lights he'd strung when he'd put up the Christmas decorations. He'd sworn to God and anybody else listening that he'd never do it again. Well, this year he didn't. The house with the bay window had gone the way of the rest of their community property. He supposed Janie had a tree. He did not.

There was no need to knock. They had been seen arriving. The yard light came on and the front door opened before they reached the steps. A woman in a blue bathrobe was standing there.

"Stevie!" she said. "What -- "

"I found him over at the shopping mall, ma'am," Falfa explained. "He's okay."

"I went to see Santa to tell him something I forgot. He was gone. But Bob says it's okay. Santa can hear me think so he knows anyway and policemen don't lie, do they, Mom?"

"No, dear, of course they don't. Now say goodnight to the officer and let's get you to bed." She turned to Falfa. "My husband's in the living room, officer. He'll answer any questions. I'd better tuck Stevie in. Santa's coming any minute, you know." She winked.

"G'night, Bob, and don't worry. I bet Santa can read big people's minds, too."

"Good night, Stevie." *God, how I'd like to believe that, kid.*

The Kimbells turned out to be nice folks. As he guessed, they had no idea Stevie was gone. They weren't sure why he'd taken it into his head to go back to Santa Claus.

PAUL/E

"But it probably has to do with Rickie," Mrs. Kimbell said. "Rickie was one of Stevie's friends. He died a few days ago. Stevie has been very sad about it."

"Yeah, I suppose," Falfa responded politely. He wanted like hell to leave. He wanted to be away from the cozy room with the big tree and the red stockings hanging at the fireplace, away from the nice people. There was no tree and no fireplace at his apartment and the only stockings were the ones in his underwear drawer. There were no nice people. There were no people at all. "I've gotta go now."

"Just a minute, please." Mrs. Kimbell said.

She went back into the kitchen, and when she returned she was carrying a little sack. "It's Christmas cookies," she said. "Please accept them. It's not much, but I'm a very good cookie baker."

"She really is, officer," Mr. Kimbell said, smilingly patting a little bulge at his beltline.

"Thanks." He took the sack and hurried out before they could wish him a Merry Christmas.

He was almost to his motorcycle when he heard, "Bob, wait!" Stevie was running down the sidewalk with a big bundle in his arms. He thrust it at Falfa. "This is for you."

The four bows were in no order and two of them clashed. There was as much tape as paper. But Falfa opened it carefully as Stevie watched, obviously proud of himself. Inside was a teddy bear -- not a new one, one that had seen some loving in its time.

"You don't want to part with this, Stevie."

"Yes, I do." He motioned for Falfa to stoop down. When he did Stevie hugged him. "Santa did hear my inside voice. My friend Rickie died and I wanted him to bring me another friend. And I got you. Merry Christmas, Bob."

"Merry Christmas, Stevie."

The little boy ran back into the house.

Falfa stood there with the sack of cookies and the teddy bear, and looked at the Christmas lights.

"God damn," he muttered. "God damn it."

And the tears began. He didn't even try to stop them. He couldn't have anyway. There were too many now to dam up. He was glad he was alone. Tough guys aren't supposed to cry, especially over little boys and cookies and old teddy bears. But it felt good.

He stopped by the phone booth and looked at it for a while, unsure. Then he wiped his face, blew his nose and went in.

"Operator."

"I want to call Sacramento."

The phone rang four times. He almost hung up.

"Hello."

"Hi, Janie."

"Bob?" There was a hesitation. "Is something wrong?"

*Yeah, lots.* "No, I just felt like wishing you all a Merry Christmas. The kids up?"

"They just went to bed, but I'll get them -- "

"No, no. Let them sleep. Santa only comes when they're asleep." Now why the hell did he say that? She'd think he'd been drinking.

To his surprise she responded seriously. "That's true." Then she hesitated again. "Are you busy tomorrow?"

"Not really. I'm off this year."

"That's nice."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"If you don't have any other plans you can come over for Christmas dinner."

"I can't -- shouldn't -- I mean, what would your mom say?"

BULLE

"You know Mom always liked you best." They both laughed nervously at the old joke. "Please, Bobby."

"Yeah, okay. I'll be there. Merry Christmas, Janie."

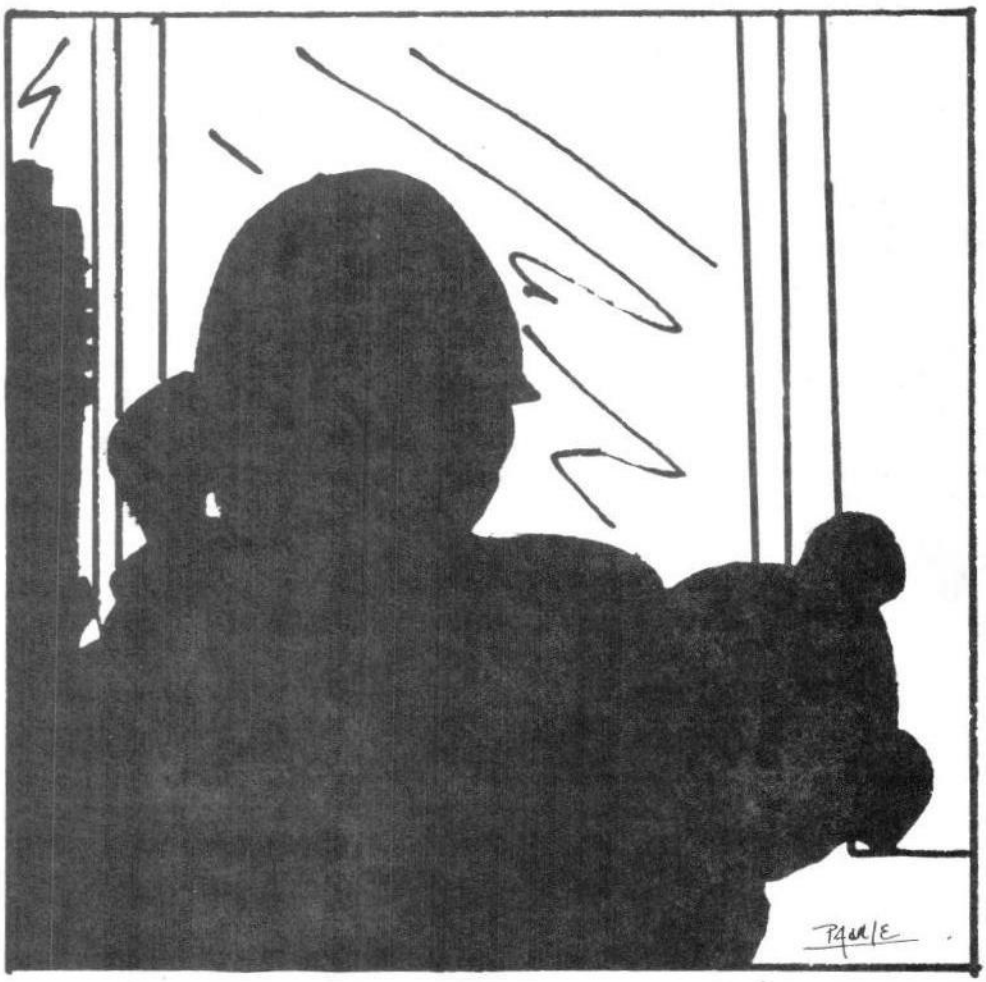
"Merry Christmas."

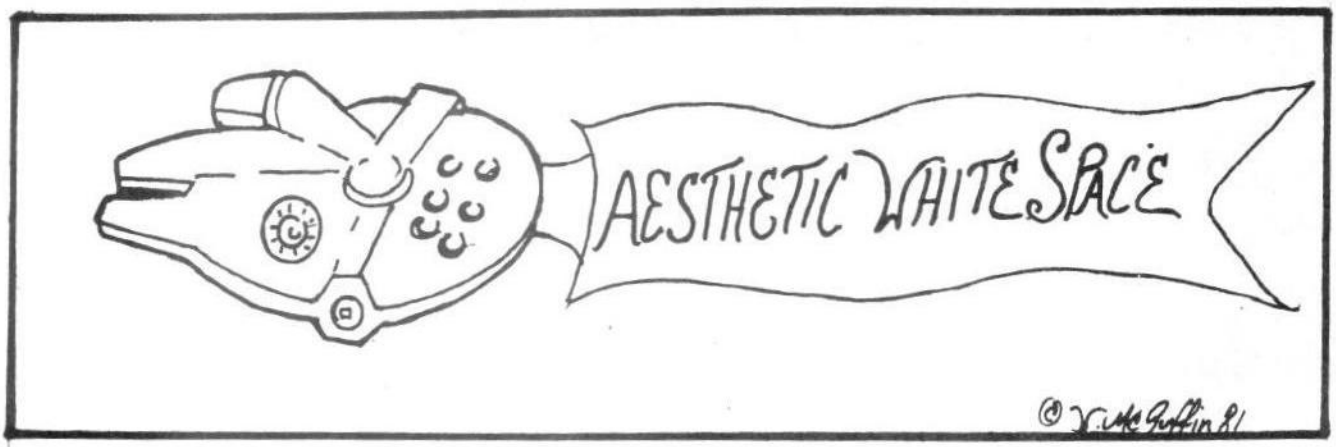
Far away the carillon was still clanging. When he stepped back into the street he could just hear it:

*"Oh, tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy .... "*

*Yeah*, he thought, looking at the night sky which no longer seemed so dark and lonely, and he joined in the refrain:

*"Oh, tidings of comfort and joy."*



# Day Of Atonement

Forgiveness.
He's asking for forgiveness.
Jesus. (Whoa. Guess a guy
    shouldn't say that in a synagogue.)
Holy Moses, then, okay?
Avram needs forgiveness like a baby needs it.
Hell -- heck, he's a rabbi.
That makes it official that he's
    a holy man.
Even if he was a farmer
    he'd be a holy man.
Me, I'm the one with the sins.
I do the sins,
    he spends the whole day starving
    and asking for forgiveness.
What the hell am I doing here?
What's Tommy Lillard got to do with
    temples and praying and apologizing
    to anybody -- even God?
Yom Kippur.
It's just another day.
I ought to be gambling and drinking
    and whoring --
Sorry.
When a guy's hungry he slips up sometimes.
Ignore me. I'm just a dumb cowpoke.
But listen to my friend.
He's a good man.
Okay?

*Denise Sheets*

# A Festival In Paradise

## J.A. Berger

*illustrated by Martynn*

Han Solo pulled absentmindedly at the flight gloves as he strolled wearily down the dimly lighted corridors toward his quarters. His thoughts were on the comforts of a soft bed and uninterrupted hours of dreamless oblivion. He was tired.

He slapped the gloves against his leg as he luxuriated in the peacefulness of his surroundings, and lengthened his stride with single minded purpose.

"Han. Wait up."

He stopped. Weary shoulders straightened, muscles suddenly taut with expectancy; he turned. A belligerency flickering in his hazel eyes, he watched the graceful figure in white robes hurry toward him.

The expression on the Corellian's handsome features was notices, for Leia Organa's steps faltered as she reached the tall man's side. "You're back. Did you get it?"

"Did I get it?" Solo quipped sweetly, his eyes sparkling with irritation and mounting anger. "Oh, I got it all right -- "

"What's wrong with you?" Leia questioned sharply, her temper rising to meet that of the Corellian.

"Why in hell didn't you tell me that pickup was smuggled Imperial weaponry?"

"You were quick enough to take the fee I offered for that run!" she defended hotly. She met hazel-eyed anger with brown-eyed fury. "I told you it would be dangerous when you accepted the mission, fly-boy!"

"You *didn't* tell me those coordinates you gave me for pickup would be the Imperial War Department!"

"I tried to, damn you! You said, and I quote, 'I'd go to Falantina's Hell Hole if the price was right.' "

"Well, I think we've been there!" Solo stated belligerently. "Chewie and I 'bout got our asses shot off. You can thank your royal hide you ran into me, and not my co-pilot, right now."

Leia Organa bit off a short retort as she attempted to control her anger. She drew a deep breath and glanced past the arrogant spacer to the deserted hallways as she chose her next words carefully. "Han I'm sorry. You are all right, aren't you?"

A surprised brow shot upward. "Did I detect a note of concern? For me?" An inquiring hand brushed his shirt in mock amazement. "What's the catch?"

"Han, it was important or I wouldn't have sent you. You know that, don't you?"

"I just assumed you enjoyed watching me get my tail shot off!"

"I *said* I was sorry." She bristled. "I promise to be a little more detailed on future briefings, all right? Truce?"

There was no longer any doubt; suspicion was easily readable in the Corellian's hazel eyes. "Okay," he agreed uneasily, "truce." He studied the beautifully clear, totally unreadable features of the young senator, and his wariness mounted. "Chewie's unloading the last of it now. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to my quarters, and sleep for the next twelve planet hours. The Force had better be with anyone who bothers me ... "

A small white hand reached out, stopping him as he turned away. "Han, wait -- something's come up -- "

He turned back to the young woman. "What?" The single word was tainted with distrust.

"We only have a few hours ... "

"Of course," he moaned. "Why do I listen to this?"

"Han, the *Falcon* -- can she be ready to lift off in two or three hours?"

Understanding straightened the Corellian's broad shoulders. "No!! Oh no, you don't! He shook his head in denial. "Uh-uh, no way! We had an understanding before this last trip, remember?"

"It won't interfere, I promise."

"No!!!"

"Han, let me explain ... "

Solo whirled and started down the quiet corridor, hot Corellian execrations filling the silent hallways.

Leia ran after him. She reached for his arm, hesitated, then attempted to match her shorter stride to his long one. She failed, and resorted to a graceful, light-footed trot. "Han, just listen -- that's all I ask, please?"

Solo stopped in mid-stride. The Princess bumped into him, quickly backing out of his reach.

"I don't want to hear anything about another mission," he stated firmly. "Chewie and I put in for a leave several weeks ago, remember?" He smiled. "You should -- you okayed it."

"Of course I remember -- "

"Well, that's fortunate, because we're taking it just like we planned," Solo interrupted. "I ain't under no obligation to this rag-tag organization -- "

"No, you're not," Leia agreed softly.

At her tender, very feminine acknowledgement, Solo backed away. "Oh, no, you don't! That ain't gonna work on me!"

"Han, it's only for two or three days, round trip."

"Sorry. Chewie and me are looking forward to getting to Kashyyyk and spending some time with his family before Life Day. We've promised ourselves some time off, and we're taking it!"

"This won't interfere, I promise!" Leia promised fervently. "Chewie can take an Alliance shuttle and go on home. You and the *Falcon* can meet him there in five days. That's within your leave schedule, isn't it?"

"Dammit, woman, you know it is! But this isn't gonna work, not this time. I'm damned tired of getting shot at ... "

"No, no," Leia denied quickly. "It's not that kind of mission, Han, honestly. No one will be shooting at you. This is strictly a diplomatic trip -- "

"Uh-uh, no way!" Solo turned and started away from her. "That's worse than getting shot at," he declared hotly. "Give me a detail of blaster-happy stormtroopers any day to a table full of smiling diplomats. Get Luke. He'll take you."

"Han." She swore under her breath as she watched the arrogant spacer stride away from her, his back rigid with determination. "Han, I would ask Luke, but you're the only one on base who knows anything about the Mandarian system."

Han Solo stopped in mid-stride. He turned back to face her, and for a brief instant interest flickered behind hazel eyes before it was quickly extinguished. Leia hurried to his side. "What's Mandara got to do with this? She's a closed world."

"That's where we're going."

"And I'm not going to be shot at?!!" Solo interrupted, his voice rising in the silent halls about them.

"Han, keep your voice down!" Leia hissed. "There are people trying to sleep!"

"Lucky them!"

"The Mandarian system is located -- "

"I know where it's located! It just happens to be in the center of the Imperial Defense Corridors! That system's patrolled like the Emperor's harem -- and even less accessible! Shit, woman, are you tired of living?"

"We've got coordinates to Mandara," Leia explained with short patience. ""We'll pop hyper over her and go right down -- in and out. Does that sound so difficult? It shouldn't -- you've perfected the procedure to a fine degree her at base," she reminded him with a definite barb to her words.

"You weren't listening," he snapped back. "She's a *closed* world."

"If you'd shut up I could have told you we've gotten permission to land there," she replied in sugar-coated sarcasm.

"What ... " There was no longer any doubt; Han Solo's interest had been thoroughly aroused.

Excitement brightened the Princess' expressive eyes as she met his interest eagerly. "Han, the Mandarians have opened diplomatic channels to us. Do you realize how important this could be?"

"Mandara? You -- got permission -- to land -- on Mandara?" He articulated each word carefully, his features extremely thoughtful.

"Are you listening to me?" Leia glanced into the fathomless eyes of the smuggler.

"Sure." The word was softly spoken , Han's eyes still vacant with faraway images of unknown pleasures.

"The Mandarian world is located strategically in the very heart of the Imperial shipping lanes. If we could establish a rapport with her peoples, perhaps even petition for a base there ... " Leia paused, irritation noticeable in her dark eyed gaze. The expression on the Corellian's face had changed from speculation to an almost undeniable touch of euphoria. "Han!"

Solo drew a deep breath and slowly released it. Vivid pictures came unhearlded into his suconscious; holos of paganistic rites; beautiful women, scantily clad, swaying to the strange blood-stirring rhythms of primitive drums; strange tales of passion, undeniable longings for the pleasures of body and mind, heightened by a native drink that brought a man's body to a fiver pitch -- a woman's the the very depths of obedience and wanton desires ....

"Han Solo, have you heard anything I've said?"

The Corellian started at Leia's sharp words. "What? Oh, sure. Why have they contacted us -- what can we offer them?"

"They weren't specific," Leia hedged, fearing his disapproval. "Just that they're desperately in need of help -- "

"We can't refuse a cry for help."

She glanced at him suspiciously. "No, we can't." She tilted her head and studied him intently. "Can I assume you've agreed to this mission?"

"Sure." Innocence radiated from his hazel eyes. "Like you said -- in and out -- back in three days. I mean -- after all -- " He fumbled under her intense scrutiny. "A chance to see a closed world. A guy doesn't get an opportunity like that every day."

"Corellian curiosity?" Leia offered, amused.

"Yeah. We've got tons of it," Solo replied brightly.

"I didn't notice any of it prior to this last assignment -- "

Solo shrugged. "You've seen one Imperial cannon, you've seen 'em all."

Suspicion hit the young senator hard. Her eyes narrowed with a closer scrutiny of the Corellian spacer. "Han, what do you know about the Mandarians?"

"Not much," Solo hedged, choosing his words carefully. "I've seen some old Imperial holos somewhere -- I think -- years ago. I can't even remember when -- where. And I've heard rumors, like you hear about all inaccessible worlds -- " The look he gave her was one filled with hooded innocence. "What do you know about them?"

Leia shook her head in negative response to his inquiry. "Less than you, obviously. I didn't see any of those holos." She glanced at him. "They're said to be a very primitive, peacefully innocent people who were preyed on by the scum of the galaxy until they petitioned for closed world status."

"That's life," Solo quipped philosphically, paganistic drums again sounding in the man's subconscious.

Leia's voice hardened with irritated anger. "Of course, the Emperor was quick to grant their request. There's nothing of great value on Mandara and becuase of her position relative to the Imperial Defense Corridors, it was to their advantage to keep off-worlders out of the sector."

Solo shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, his interest moving from the young woman to the empty corridors. "Hadn't we better get moving? You did say you wanted to leave in two or three hours . I'll have to see to the *Falcon*."

"Yes, of course."

Solo checked his chronometer. "I'll be ready to lift off at 0400. How's that?"

"That's fine, thank you." She drew a deep breath and mumbled softly, "Why do I get the feeling there's something going on here that I don't know about?"

"It's just your overworked suspicion," Solo commented, and quickly changed the subject. "Luke's going, isn't he?"

The suspicious gleam returned to the dark-eyed gaze of the pretty senator. "Why?"

"For company. I'll need someone to talk to while you're tabled with the diplomats."

She smiled. "I think he can be talked into coming. In fact, I think I'll insist on it. Maybe he can keep you out of trouble."

Han smiled agreeably, the lopsided grin masking the eagerness that pumped hotly through his veins. "See you at 0400."

Leia stood, hands on hips, watching the arrogant spacer hurry down the corridor away from her. "That was too easy, dammit," she mumbled softly, then shrugged pretty shoulders and turned toward the personnel quarters and the young Jedi who awaited her return.

* * *

"Han, the coordinates are locked in."

"Hold it steady -- " Solo reached above his head and flipped several switches, bring the *Falcon*'s high powered sensor package alive. "Deflector shields are on max, cut in sublight engines ... "

Luke's hands moved over the co-pilot's board as he brought the freighter out of hyper under the watchful eyes of the Corellian seated beside him.

The starfield streaked, dappled, then settled into place outside the *Falcon*'s circular canopy.

Solo threw another switch and the vessel's main thrusters sped her to the small emerald-green world that was growing before them. "Look sharp, Luke, this is one busy sector. If there's any Imperial patrols around, I want to see them before they see us."

"Han, I'm picking up something on the sensors -- .0600 -- it's not a ship."

"I see it. It's stationary -- just outside Mandara's air space. Check and see if there's any others positioned around the planet."

"Yes. I've picked up a dozen, maybe more, in equidistant positioning. What are they?"

The Corellian swore hotly . He banked the vessel to port and maneuvered toward the nearest blip. "Imperial eyes." His thumb moved with obvious intent to the auto-fire button on his console.

"What?"

"Beacons, set out in the corridors around Mandara to record and alert the Empire to any activity -- friendly or outherwise -- coming and going from the planet."

The small black device moved into the crosshairs of Solo's targeting grid. His thumb tightened.

"No -- wait!"

A flash of blue energy erupted from the *Falcon*'s main turret. The Imperial instrument glowed then exploded before their eyes.

"Why don't you just send out announcements that we're going in?" Princess Leia snapped as she dropped into the navigational seat behind Solo.

"That's exactly what I'd've done if I hadn't blasted that thing, Your Royalness," Solo replied. His eyes remained on the sensor screen as he expertly guided the *Falcon* into a planetary orbit well below the influence of the remaining beacons. "Luke, mark our descent pattern. We'll want the same corridor at lift-off. Are you getting any signals from Mandara?"

"I've got a weak 'homer' on the scanners now."

Solo nodded his relief. He turned to the obviously miffed Alderaani. "Those beacons are equipped with holo apparatus. As soon as we'd crossed its eye, the holos of this ships would have been beamed to Imperial headquarters. How long do you thing we would have had on this trip of yours after Vader or some of his crowd saw this ship?"

"What are they going to think when that beacon doesn't signal their board at the next check in?" she inquired, watching the arrogant spacer intently.

"They'll think it's probably malfunctioning, since all the others are still sending out signals. And when they've got a ship in the area, they'll check it out. Odds are it won't be before we've finished our business and left."

"You can't be sure of that."

"No I can't, your Worshipfulness," he smiled sweetly. "But the odds are still a hell of a lot better than they'd be if a holo of the *Falcon* was received, now isn't it?"

"Han, look at her! She's beautiful! I've never seen so much water."

Han Solo smiled at the Tatooine native's wide-eyed amazement as they roared across Mandara.

Solo flipped on his TFS scanner and made some quick checks on the planet over which they flew. "She's about four-fifths ocean. There's one major land mass, where our co-ordinates are taking us. Seems lightly populated, settlements scattered throughout the interior."

Solo frowned and rechecked several instrument readings. "I'm not picking up any kind of communications signals. None at all. How in hell did they contact us?"

"Maybe their systems are shielded," Leia offered helpfully, as she leaned forward to watch the fertile green world grow before them.

"Maybe," Solo replied, but he didn't sound convinced.

The *Falcon* roared over lush, green jungles; everything in cool green and blues, accented with subtle hues of brightly colored flowering trees and lush foliage.

"Have either of you seen any sign of vehicle accesses or roads?"

Luke and Leia shook their heads.

"This doesn't make any sense,"Solo mumbled and he checked their co-ordinates again. "It's got to be shielding." A clearing opened before them, surrounded by low buildings more open than covered, built from the native trees and foliage of Mandara. "Talk about a closed world--"

"I've never seen any place so peaceful, so beautiful--" Luke voiced in wonderment.

The freighter's landing gear dropped into place, the hydrolics silent; blocked by the powerful emissions of the vessel's retros. She edged gracefully toward the ground in the center of the clearing.

"We're there." Solo slapped all his systems to silence and struggled to his feet, motioning the others out of the cockpitahead of him. "Let's go meet the natives."

"Before we leave the *Falcon*, there's something I'd like to say." Leia stopped him.

Solo stiffened expectantly. "Say it."

"These people have asked for this meeting. As I understand it, this is being held during an important time for them. Please, you two, remember what we're here for; try to respect and understand their ways--be friendly--"

Solo choked.

Luke struck him sharply between the shoulder blades. "Are you all right?"

"Fine--just fine," Han croaked hoarsely, wiping at his watering eyes with the back of his hand. He met Leia's questioning look. "You--want us to--uh--join in--sort of, do in Mandara what the Mandarians do--" he ventured carefully. "Be friendly?"

"Exactly." She eyed him apprehensively. "Am I asking too much?"

"No--no, not at all," Solo assured her pleasantly. "I just wanted to be sure I understood your orders. Their every wish will be my command."

"Good." Leia shot him a very distrusting glance, but the Corellian's countenance was a mask of innocence. "Let's go, they're probably waiting for us."

Han carefully maneuvered past the young senator and activated the *Falcon's* hatch-open sequence. The servos purring in health, he ordered the ramp released and the appliance moved smoothly into place.

Standing at the opened hatch, Han Solo got his first look at the peoples of Mandara. He smiled happily, his eyes dancing in anticipated pleasures. He stepped aside to allow the Princess to take her place at the head of the ramp. He heard her barely controlled gasp of surprise, and his smile broadened.

Leia stood spellbound at the top of the ramp, gazing in wide-eyed astonishment at the assembled masses.

Han guessed there to be several hundred women and men standing in the semi-circle before them. The men were short, broad-shouldered, masculine in every line of their scantily clad bodies. Their minimal dress was light and designed to show to advantage their obvious attributes to the females of their race.

Han sighed. His gaze wandered rampant among the tall dusky maidens of Mandara, their willowy, pleasingly rounded bodies draped with light, filmy robes which accented the delights underneath. Yes, Mandara was everything the holos had promised. He sensed, rather than saw, the amusement on the Tatooin's face.

"I think I understand your excitement about this trip now," Luke mumbled softly, his words carrying only to the tall Corellian. "They're as beautiful as their world."

"Yes, aren't they," Solo said, his eyes roaming over the wealth of pleasures he envisioned as they moved slowly down the ramp behind the rigid back of the Alderaani who was very much overdressed in the flowing white robes of her office.

Han's eyes settled on a dark beauty who stepped away from the others and moved gracefully toward them. A barrel-chested, muscular young man moved from his place in the crowd and fell in step beside her. Solo studied him briefly before returning his admiring gaze to the dusky beauty.

"Welcome to Mandara, off-worlders. I am Labee Ono, high priestess of our Festival of Renewal." She lowered her regal brow and bowed gracefully before them.

"I am honored," Leia replied softly, returning the bow with equal grace. "I am Princess Leia Organa, Alderaani Senator and chose representative of the Rebel Alliance. I greet thee."

"This is Re-Dav , high priest during the time of Festival," Labee Ono introduced pleasantly, nodding to the handsome man beside her.

Leia bowed before the stocky Mandarian, her dark eyes flashing as she tried to avoid the openly flirting gaze of the man.

"I welcome one of such delicate beauty to our time of renewal. May your days be filled with peace, serenity and the loves of your desire."

"Thank you," Leia mumbled in growing unease as the Mandarian continued to eye her with an open speculation. *Damn him*, she swore to herself, thinking of the tall spacer behind her. *Somehow he knew!*

The Mandarian priest smiled at her discomfort and his eyes drifted with hooded conjecture toward the two men behind the small Alderaani.

Leia smiled. "Excuse my manners, Your Highness. This is Luke Skywalker, a native of Tatooine." Leia nodded toward the young Jedi then turned to the tall, arrogant man to her right. "And, Han Solo -- "

"A Corellian, I believe?" the Mandarian voice softly. His dark eyes settled on the blaster on Solo's hip. "You picked your entourage well, Princess. Are their talents as varied as their looks?"

Leia's eyes hardened with a mixture of embarrassment and anger as she witnessed the exchange between the Corellian and the Mandarian maiden beside Re-Dav. "You can bet on it."

"Diplomacy, remember, Your Royalness," Solo said serenely as Leia blocked him momentarily from the Mandarian's view. "Gods, I think I'm in love," he murmured as his gaze settled again on the beautiful Labee Ono.

Labee clapped her hands sharply and turned to face the gathered throng. "It will soon be time of feasting and our guests must have time to rest. Everyone, about your ways in preparation for the hours of Renewal. We will meet at the appointed place -- at the appointed time."

There was a great deal of bowing and the assemblage slowly drifted away from the two Mandarians and the off-worlders. There was little conversation between them as they went about their tasks.

"I know there are many questions and much to be discussed," Re-Dav said as if in anticipation of words already forming on Leia's lips. "But first, let us show you our compound. We will talk of that which brought you here at feasting tonight -- "

Re-Dav extended his arm and Leia hestantly accepted, her discomfort finding release as she glanced around the primitive compound of the Mandarians. She was conscious of the beautiful maiden taking the arms of both Luke and Han, her gracefully rounded contours fitting happily between the two young men's. Luke's features were a mixture of embarrassment, unease, and a growing curiosity of their surroundings and the world's people. Solo's reflected complete contentment and open devotion to the vision of loveliness that clung so possessively to his arm.

"And I told him to be friendly," she mumbled between clenched teeth. "Someday, I'm going to learn to read that man *before* he makes a fool of me," she vowed hotly.

The day was hot, the weather humid as befitting the climate of a tropical world. The three off-worlders were soon sweltering in discomfort under their inappropriate clothing as they wandered through the primitive living areas of the Mandarian society.

Luke pulled uncomfortably at the white desert shirt as it clung wetly to his perspiring body. "I'm used to hot weather," he apologized to his companions. "Why do I feel it so much more here?"

Labee Ono smiled in puzzlement.

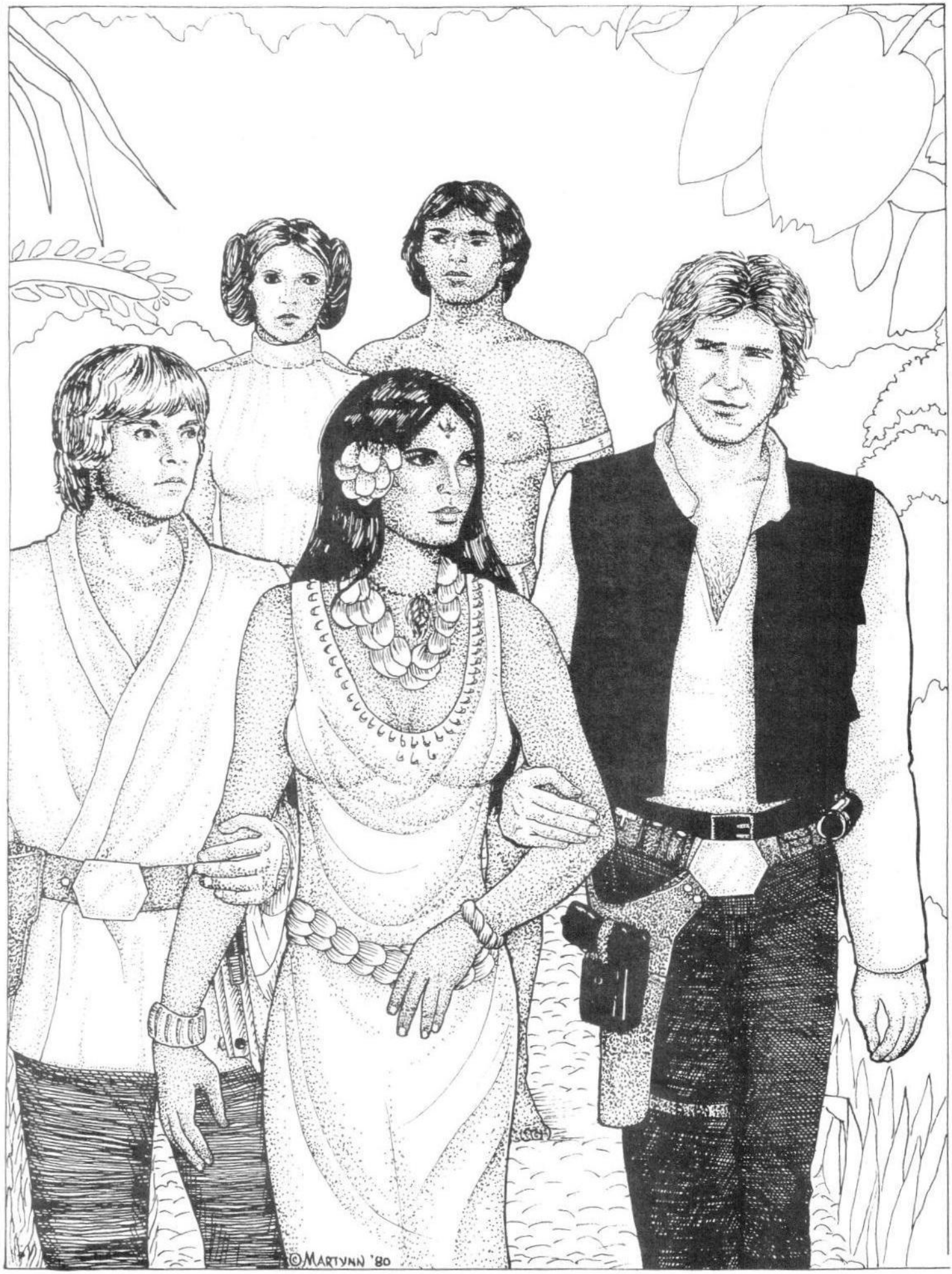
"Tatooine's a desert world," Solo explained easily.

"Of course," she smiled, her dark eyes almost carressing Solo in their open admiration of him. She turned her attention back to the young Jedi. "We're accustomed to it and dress for its discomfort. Here, let me help you." She reached out and with swift efficiency released the tie to Luke's desert wraparound. It fell open to Luke's surprise and Solo's amusement.

The young Jedi stood in uneasy discomfort as the priestess pulled the shirt from his arms, her openness making little of her boldness. Luke's features darkened with his growing embarrassment as his blue eyes met and held the bemused but obviously annoyed gaze of Leia Organa.

"What's -- that over there?" he stammered as he turned toward a long, low building and away from the gentle hands of the maiden.

"That is our place of rest and fulfillment," Re-Dav explained. "Come, we will show you."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Luke drew a deep breath as he glanced at a smiling, mischievously amused Corellian, then slipped back into his shirt. At a questioning glance from Labee Ono he left it open.

They entered the building, finding the structure pleasantly cool, each end open to allow ventilation. There were openings abundantly spaces along each wall made of woven fiber from native grown materials. Spaced throughout the dwelling, on each side of a narrow, cleanly swept aisle, were single and double woven mats.

"These are sleeping quarters," Solo commented innocently, avoiding the smoldering gaze of the Princess.

"Yes," Labee Ono confirmed. Her dark eyes met the hazel ones, and she smiled.

"Is this the men's or the women's quarters?" Leia asked as they traversed the room.

"I'm sorry, pretty one," Re-Dav mumbled in hesitation, "I didn't understand your question."

"This building, who sleeps here?"

"All sleep here. It is the place of rest and fulfillment."

A sudden understanding filtered across the Senator's face as she blushed prettily. She openly avoided the smile of the Corellian beside her. "Of course," she mumbled and moved eagerly forward to put her back to Solo. Inwardly she cringed at her innocence. Usually it was Luke who made such diplomatic blunders. She angrily chastised herself. Then a thought brought her to an immediate halt. "Are we -- I mean -- will we be quartered here?"

Re-Dav smiled. "Of course not. You are guests of Mandara. We have inquired into your customs and sleeping arrangements. Special quarters have been prepared for your privacy. However, I fear we did not anticipate your -- aides."

Leia drew a grateful breath, her suspicions lulled as they finished their tour of the paganistic life style of the Mandarian people.

"Re-Dav, I've seen no children -- no elders. Where are they?" Luke inquired.

Labee Ono's hand tightened in Solo's arm. He smiled at her, then frowned. For a moment, he thought he had read real fear in her eyes.

"Our young and old are at different compounds during the Festival of Renewal. After the days of fulfillment, we will return to our homes and those who await us."

Tatooin, Alderaani, and Corellian all exchanged comprehending glances. Leia groaned as she recognized the importance and meaning behind the Festival of Renewal. Her discomfort and unease was reflected and equally returned in the blue eyes of the young Jedi. She did not find it in the hazel-eyed gaze of the Corellian smuggler. Instead, she recognized a look of eager anticipation. *And I begged him to come on this mission,* she kicked herself mentally. *When will I ever learn?*

"I think, if you don't mind," Leia interjected carefully, "we would like to go to our quarters, cool off and rest a little. It's been a long trip, and as you mentioned, your weather is taking its toll of us."

"Of course," Re-Dav voiced his concern. "I will be pleased to show you the way. Labee, perhaps you can arrange fitting attire for them, to ease their discomfort at feasting."

"It will be a pleasure." Labee Ono squeezed Solo's arm then released it, her dark expressive eyes meeting his with veiled meaning. "Rest well -- the evening will be a pleasant one, filled with song, food and the pleasures of companionship."

Solo sighed as he watched the graceful figure moved away from them. He was unaware of anything else until Luke touched his arm and they moved hurriedly to catch up with the stocky Mandarian priest and the Princess who walked beside him.

* * * *

"No, this is too much! I can't stay here with -- "

"Your Royalness," Solo quipped sweetly as he turned to face the despairing Alderaani. "I believe your orders to Luke and me were to accept their ways, respect their customs -- go along, fit in, make an honest effort to belong. And now, after they go to all this effort to see to our comfort and provide us with private accomodations, you behave like this."

"Are you finished?" she snapped, irritation rampant in her dark eyes.

Solo smiled and sat down on the small room's one piece of furniture, then lay down on the beautifully handcrafted, very large, very comfortable bed.

"Luke?" She pleaded helplessly with the bemused Jedi.

"Han and I can sleep aboard the *Falcon*," he assured her.

"And hurt their feelings?" Solo commented softly, his eyes closed, his hands crossed behind his back.

Leia swore hotly as she stared belligerently at the resting Corellian. "Mister Know-It-All. Festival of Renewal. I should have expected something like this. You did, didn't you?" She glared at the peacefully serene Solo.

"Me?" Han opened one eye and presented the young woman with an innocent look that was anything but convincing.

"Have you been here before?" she accused, watching him in tight lipped anger.

Solo sat up. "No." Hurt radiated from the single word. "I didn't lie to you, your Royalness." He put a bite to his words at her suspicion. "But I've been around long enough to recognize the signs of a people who participate in fertility rites. I thought you had too. You *are* the diplomat, remember? It *is* your job to find out these things."

"Han, how could she--" Luke defended, "Mandara's a closed world, she couldn't have known."

"It's okay, Luke." Leia admitted begrudgingly, "He's right--again. I should have known when we stepped off and were greeted by only young, virile, very desireable people. Their clothing, their interest in us, even the sleeping arrangements -- the signs were there -- I missed them. I was a damned fool -- worse, a blind one."

A silence fell over the small room as each mulled over his or her own thoughts. A knock fell at the door and Luke drew a grateful breath and opened it.

In the open doorway stood a tall girl of Luke's age, her arms filled with clothing which she held out to the young Jedi. She smiled, a deep dimple in her cheek adding to her dark virginal beauty. Luke smiled back, accepting the clothing without conscious thought. His blue eyes were deeply enthralled with the dark beauty of the girl.

She lowered her eyes in blushing shyness but not before he felt the brushing touch of uneasiness against his Force-sensitive consciousness. "Thank you," he mumbled, his words stumbling over a suddenly thick tongue. He forgot the warning as the girl flashed him another shy smile and left the room.

Luke started, blinked then blushed noticeably as he met the silent but amused stares of his friends. "I guess these are for us." He offered the clothing innocently.

"Ahh," Leia groaned. "I can see I'm going to have a hard time getting any help from either of you."

She took the meager pile of clothing from Luke, sorted through it, separating it into three piles. "Here, you two, you can dress in the *Falcon*, and I'll meet you back here at the appointed time."

Luke accepted the clothing, glanced at the meager attire, then shifted a pleading look to the tall Corellian.

Solo held up a hand silencing the young Jedi, as he smilingly accepted the native attire handed to him. "No."

"What?" Leia glanced at him sharply. "What did you say?"

"I said -- no," Solo repeated sweetly.

"Han, this is a diplomatic mission, remember? Don't get difficult about this." Slender well-groomed hands went to nicely-shapped hips as she faced off before the tall smuggler. "You were damned quick to agree to the sleeping arrangements!"

"Your Royalness," Solo interjected patiently, "you're the diplomat. Luke and I just came along for the ride. 'Sides, I'd look damn strange with a blaster belted over a loin cloth."

Luke grinned at the Corellian's teasing words.

"It's not that bad," Leia started, then paused. "Blaster? Han, you can't be serious! You can't go armed!"

Solo's smile broadened but there was no laughter in his hazel eyes. "Yes, I can."

"That would be an open statement of mistrust!"

"Han," Luke ventured, "how about a Corellian compromise?"

Solo shot Skywalker an interested glance. "Sounds intriguing, kid. What's on your mind?"

"These shirts," Luke held up a vest-like shirt, light, open down the front, sleeveless and heavily stitched with Mandarian symbols. "They look cool and comfortable. What do you say we wear them to show our good faith, and stay with the rest of our own clothing?"

"And the blaster?" Leia snapped in irritation.

Luke sighed. "I understand the importance of this alliance, Leia," he stalled, glancing from the suspicious Alderaani to the arrogantly confident Corellian, "but I agree with Han."

"You would," she moaned.

"You're wasting your breath, Luke," Solo replied, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

"Well?" Leia stood before the uneasy Jedi.

"I can't explain it," Luke hedged. "It's a feeling I've had since we landed here -- Han?"

"I know what you're saying, kid, but I can't help you. I ain't got no all-powerful Force to jangle my suspicions. I just know I don't like Re-Dav."

"I can't believe this!" Leia swore under her breath. "I haven't noticed the two of you finding anything objectionable about Labee Ono !"

"No," Solo agreed, drawing a deep breath. "Nothing objectionable at all."

"Ahhh, men!"

A speculating light flickered momentarily in the Corellian's hazel eyes as he studied the young Senator before him. "Have you looked at your wardrobe yet, Your Royalness?"

Leia glanced suspiciously at the tall spacer then belligerantly shook out the long gown and held it up. Her eyes widened with horror as she studied the beautifully decorated, very thin apparel. "Oh, gods!"

"You'll look like a million," Solo commented admiringly. "You should have every man out there begging you to follow him to the mats."

"I can't -- "

"Remember, Your Royalness, this is a diplomatic mission and you are the diplomat."

Dark eyes turned pleading helplessness toward the blond rebel youth. "I can't wear this."

Luke's blue eyes softened at the frustration in Leia's eyes. "We could probably open the Corellian compromise to include an Alderaani." He smiled gently as he read eager acceptance to his solution.

"How?"

"Your Senate robes -- " Luke fumbled, avoiding Solo's amused gaze. "Are they -- I guess they have to be -- multi-layered -- "

Leia frowned in confusion.

"Undergarments -- slips, chemise, *l'matres, ii'matas* -- " Solo offered helpfully in several graphic galactic languages.

"*You* would know," Leia glared at him.

"Just trying to help," Solo smiled roguishly.

"Could you put the Mandarian gown over them without -- " Luke flushed under the Corellian's steady gaze.

"Making a spectacle of your Alderaai attributes," Solo finished again.

"Will you two please get out of here?" Leia whispered pleadingly.

Luke grabbed at the primitive door latch, eager to leave the small room and the upset Princess. He heard Solo's soft chuckle behind him.

* * * *

"You know what to do. I don't want anything going wrong now."

Labee Ono nodded, her dark eyes lowered before the heavy set figure of the Mandarian priest.

"I want you to keep that damned Corellian occupied tonight. I don't want to give him a chance to start asking questions. You've instructed Lacy in the entertaining of Skywalker?"

"Yes," Labee whispered. She glanced up, her eyes filled with fear. "Must she be pulled into this? She's young -- this is first Festival for her ... "

"No. The boy is young, too. Anyone older and he might be put off. Besides, being your sister, she knows what will happen if Skywalker loses interest and becomes curious." Re-Dav reached out and grabbed the long black tresses of the Mandarian girl close to the skull and wrenched her head backward until she was forced to look into his hardened eyes. "If you get any ideas of your own tonight, remember your family and the others in the interior. If you make one move to warn Organa or the others, they die. Understand?"

"Yes," Labee gasped as he savagely released her. "They are good people," she whispered in defence of the guests. "Why do this to them?"

"They are enemies of the Empire!"

"This is our time of Renewal," Labee whispered urgently. "A time of giving reverence to life." She glanced up, fear naked in her eyes. "Your plans are to take life -- it is against our ways!"

"They are offworlders and of no concern to you." Re-Dav's eyes hardened with threatened mayhem if she continued her defiance of his orders. She fell silent. "Have the contents I gave you for the drinks been prepared?"

Labee nodded.

A cruel light of pleasure touched Re-Dav's dark eyes. "We shall make this night a memorable one for our guests."

"M'laka is our ceremonial drink," Labee objected softly. "It was not meant for outworlders -- nor to be used in the way you have intended."

"I want you to fill the Corellian to the gills with the stuff."

Fear touched the maiden's eyes at Re-Dav's harsh words. "He will not be responsible for his actions!"

Re-Dav chuckled, the sound hollow and evil in the darkness of the coming night. "You're a woman, a very desirable one. I've seen the looks he's given you. I want him totally at the mercy of your charms. The drink will keep his mind, and his body, on you and away from the others. Divide and conquer -- a very old, very effective battle plan."

"Lacy ... "

"The Kid'll probably pass out, so don't worry about Lacy," he warned. "The stuff's strong. It has to be to make sure Solo gets his fair share--and the Princess, I don't know about their tolerance levels."

"The Princess? She's unarmed! She can give you little trouble once the men are away from her side."

"I've always wondered about the pleasures of bedding royalty. Tonight I shall enjoy the company of a very pretty, very willing Alderaanian."

"No! It is not right! Our Festival is not meant for use this way!"

"Remember, my Mandarian beauty, what will happen if you do not do as I've instructed. The Mandarians are a very old, very primitive race compared to the powers of the Empire. You could find yourselves bartered as slaves on the open market, and this world opened to Imperial colonization."

Labee Ono shivered in repugnancy. "How can we know this will not be done anyway?"

"You have my word," Re-Dav snickered. "Besides, we have a partnership beneficial to us both. We wipe the scum of rebellion from the galaxy, and the Mandarians contine their meaningless existence on this closed world."

Solo sat at the low table that had been prepared for them on the dais before the assemblage. The meal had been of native fruits and an unfamiliar variety of meat that he found tasty and filling. And, he glanced at the beautiful, dusky maiden at his left, the company had been more than pleasant.

Labee's dark eyes met his and they held a silent promise of better things to come. Han reluctantly pulled his attention away from the Mandarian and forced his Corellian blood to cool. He felt restless, edgy, and the feeling disturbed him. Everything had progressed as anticipated. There had been Mandarian entertainment; songs, dances which left him awe of the people's history and their primitive reverence of life. Yet, his uneasiness continued to grow.

He glanced to his right and Luke smiled at him.

"Han, why can't we find this kind of peace in our worlds?" the young Jedi commented softly.

"I don't know, Kid," Solo replied. "But I've always found there's at least one snake in every paradise--and Mandara has hers."

Luke frowned in puzzlement, then followed Solo's gaze towards the opposite end of their table. He watched as Re-Dav, smiling, leaned closer to the enthralled Alderaaian, his hand finding hers and holding it with a familiarity that stiffened Luke's shoulders. He glanced back at the Corellian.

"What is it, Han?"

"I don't know," Solo admitted hesitantly, " I just don't like the bastard."

Luke blinked, his pale blue eyes locking to the worried hazel ones of his friend. "He can't get too friendly here at the table. I'm sure Leia can handle him."

"Sure," Solo mumbled, but the hazel eyes were hooded with a hardened light Luke could not put a name to.

A small, brown hand touched his arm lightly, Luke turned and smiled at the dusky maiden to his right. He took the cup she offered him. She grinned, her dimple deepening prettily, her eyes lowered demurely before his admiration.

"Solo?"

Han turned back at the softly spoken word from his table companion, and me the dark-eyed beauty of Labee Ono.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, Labee," he assured her. He felt her leg brush his under the table.

"Your voice belies your words." Her voice husky with the closeness of their growing friendship, reached only his ears. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, everything's fine--just fine." Solo's eyes softened.

"You've had enough to eat?"

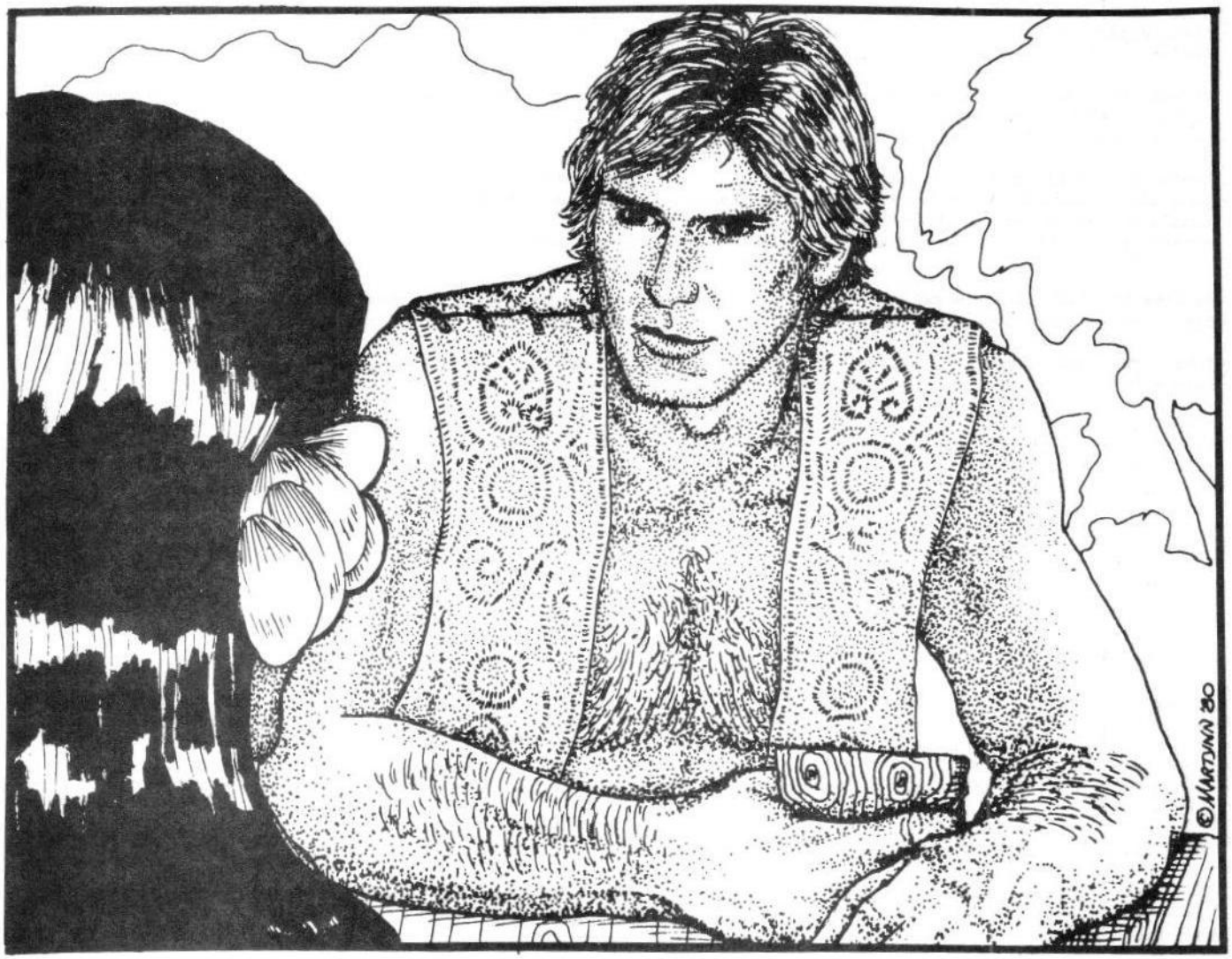
"Plenty." Again he felt the brush of her leg against his. It was a pleasant sensation and he returned it eagerly. She moved away from his touch. His brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"Labee," Re-Dav's voice intruded on their closeness. Solo stiffened in mounting dislike. "Please see your guest's cup is filled when he had finished eating."

"Yes, Re-Dav." Labee Ono reached out and took the polished wooden decanter and poured an emerald-green tinted beverage into the empty container before the watchful Corellian.

"This is M'Laka." Her dark eyes touched his. She carefully set the decanter aside. Again her hand covered his over the stem of the delicately carved container. "It is the traditional drink of our Festival--a symbol of fulfillment. The drink is important in our celebration of Life." Her hand tightened on his, her lips quivering as she leaned closer to the enraptured spacer. "Man and woman, and the continuation of Life. We are honored that you agree to share this time with us."

"We are honored to be asked," Solo returned diplomatically. He moved closer until their lips met over the brim of the primitive cup. She stiffened at his touch, but did not draw away. Her eyes flickered closed, then opened, as she gently pulled away from the soft kiss. Her hand moved from his, then returned to grasp it tightly again.



Han smiled, feeling the warmth in the woman's touch. He sighed. This evening held a great deal of promise for the fulfillment of Corellian dreams as well as Mandarian traditions, he thought happily. Maybe he had been worrying about nothing. He pulled his hand reluctantly from hers and raised the cup to his lips, his eyes meeting and holding hers.

He took a sip, hesitated, then touched the cup to his lips again. This time he did not drink. He touched his tongue to the sweet drink. Had he seen fear touch the beautiful brown eyes of the Mandarian? He was uncertain. "It's very good," he commented. He raised the cup again. This time there was no doubt, fear and helplessness touched Labee's expressive eyes. For him?

Alarms clanged in Solo's mind, as he again sampled the drink. It had a familiar tang to it. Before he lowered it, he sniffed inconspicuously at it. His eyes hardened as memory identified its contents. He returned it to the table, all but untouched.

"Is it a native drink?" he asked, as he grasped the surprisingly cold hand of the Mandarian maiden.

"Yes. It is prepared especially for Festival. Mandarians drink it at no other time. It is made from various herbs, fruits--carefully fermented and aged to proper strength for Festival."

Solo smiled and watched her closely as he again pretened to drink from the cup. The alarms resounded and he turned to face the young Jedi next to him.

"Have you tried the M'Laka?"

Han glanced at Re-Dav. The Mandarian leaned toward the softly speaking Alderaanian and refilled her cup from the same decanter he had passed down to Labee. Solo's eyes hardened with suspicion as he watched Leia take a large sip from the cup.

"Just a little," Luke commented easily. "It's a little sweet for my tastes, but it is good."

"It is, isn't it?" Han said, loud enough to carry the length of the table. He lowered his voice and leaned toward the young Jedi. "Stay off the stuff!"

Luke glanced at him quickly, reading the seriousness in the Corellian's eyes, he nodded. He glanced at Leia, then helplessly back to Solo. Han slowly shook his head. They were too far away to warn Leia without alerting Re-Dav to their suspicions.

It was the splash of liquid that pulled Solo's attention back to Labee. She had refilled his cup. He smiled warmly at her and raised it to his lips. Again, he witnessed the worry in her expression. With the cup still at his lips, he glanced at the Mandarian beside Leia.

Re-Dav lifted his cup and toasted Solo wordlessly. Solo returned the gesture. Again, he tasted the familiar tang almost masked by the sweetness of Mandarian wine. He knew the ingredients, and his suspicions mounted. Fatalina's notorious Joy Juice was not native to Mandara. Mandara was a closed world. Corellian speculation summed up the obvious. It had been brought in. By whom? He again took a tongue wetting sip.

He knew how much it would take to have the expected effect on him. He had participated in its pleasures before. But it was a heavy concentration and he could already feel the familiar warmth crawling into his system.

Luke. The thought sent his glance again toward the young Jedi, who was talking softly to the young Mandarian maiden beside him, his glass untouched beside his empty plate. Solo drew a grateful breath.

"There will be plenty of time to discuss the alliance between our peoples tomorrow, pretty one. Tonight is Festival -- the time of fulfillment and the pleasures of companionship." Re-Dav's voice filtered into Solo's conciousness, and he shot a worried glance toward the Alderaani. He groaned. Leia Organa's usually pale features were flushed to a very becoming pink. Her eyes were dark with the warmth of emotions and passions he had never seen in them before.

"I agree." Her voice was husky with mounting desires and Han swore under his breath. *Serve her right if I let this continue ....*

He cleared his throat, and lifted his cup to the captivated Mandarians. "To the Alliance."

All cups were raised.

Leia's eyes met his and he flashed a silent warning to her, his eyes going to her cup then to his. He shook his head curtly. Leia's eyes flashed with something he did not at first recognize. He groaned in sudden understanding as she held her glass out for Re-Dav to refill. She glared defiantly at the Corellian.

*Damn!* Solo lowered his cup as he glowered at the Alderaani senator. She met his gaze squarely and emptied her glass.

"Han," Luke whispered urgently, "she's drinking that stuff like water."

"She misunderstood me," Solo murmured. Mentally, the Corellian kicked himself. He should have sent the warning by Luke. Leia had thought he was telling her she had had enough, that she couldn't hold her drinks. "Damned hard-headed woman."

"Han, would you like some more?"

The Corellian turned guiltily back to the Mandarian maiden. "Yes, please." He smiled as the liquid splashed into his partially filled cup. He felt the blood surging through his veins as Labee's hand carelessly brushed his. His nerves tingled at the contact and he swore silently. He had miscalculated, too.

Labee Ono leaned forward and a small hand reached out and gently touched his lips. Again, he was aware of his leg brushed by hers. Immediately, he felt his body's eager awakening to her advances. He fought it down.

"Are you all right?" Labee watched him closely.

"Fine." He glanced about the other tables, many now empty as Mandarians finished and quietly left. They were totally ignored. "Where's everyone going?" he asked as he fought to control the heat that threatened to invade his rationality.

"At completion of Festival all go to the place of rest for fulfillment and the joys of companionship." Her hand touched his lips and outlined them gently. Again he felt his body's heightened demands. He lifted the cup and Labee smiled and lifted hers.

For a moment her hands were off him and Solo could think. He glanced longingly at her then wondered if it had been a smile or a leer. A giggle from his right and he stiffened as if hit by a bucket of cold water. *Leia Organa giggling!* He turned to Luke urgently. "Luke, you're sick!"

Luke leaned toward Solo. "What?!"

"The next time that bastard fills her cup," Solo met Re-Dav's and smiled, "I want you to get sick, And make it good. We've got to get her out of here -- now!"

Luke's expression was one of total puzzlement. His cheeks were slightly flushed from the small amounts of the beverage he'd taken, but he seemed in better control of himself than Han had dared to hope. Another giggle from Leia and Luke nodded in understanding.

Solo sighed. It was good having a friend like Luke. The kid seemed to know instinctively when to do what he was told without unnecessary explanations, He glanced again at Leia and recognized all the classic symptoms of the Joy Juice. Leia had reached the danger point. He swore at her helplessly. If Re-Dav got her alone she would do anything he asked.

*Serve her right if I let him* .... He didn't finish the thought. There was no way he was going to let Re-Dav get his hands on the young senator.

* * * *

Han Solo pushed the retching Skywalker toward the opening that would take them to their quarters. He smiled at the puzzled Mandarian priestess and made his brief apologies, nodding to a stern and obviously upset Re-Dav. Han found he enjoyed the stocky man's discomfort as he steered the unsteady, suddenly very affectionate Alderaani after the seemingly ill Luke. "Too much party, I guess," he apologized smoothly. "If you'll excuse us. I'm sure everyone will be fine after a good night's sleep."

As if cued to his words, Leia snuggled into his shoulder with purring contentment. He put an arm around her waist to keep her on her feet. Smiling innocently at their hosts, they beat a hasty retreat.

He swore under his breath as they allowed the darkness of a beautiful Mandarian night to close about them. "Luke?"

"Right here. Is she all right?"

Han groaned as Leia reached up and kissed him, pressing her very desirable body against his all too sensitive one. He moaned as he felt his body's response to her attentions. "She will be when this stuff wears off. Are you okay?"

"I think so. You warned me before I got more than a sip or two. What was it?"

"I'll explain later -- " Han paused before their quarters and shifted the snuggling Alderaani onto Luke's hesitant shoulder. "You get her to bed and stay with her until she can throw off the effects of that stuff. Get some water down her if she'll take it."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's something going on her that has my instincts screaming. I'm gonna get some answers." Han shot Luke a sharp look. "Don't let her out of your sight. And don't let that bastard Re-Dav anywhere near her."

Leia smiled and pressed herself against the young Jedi. At the surprisingly quick response of his body to hers, Luke glanced in momentary panic at the amused Corellian. "Han, how long till this stuff wears off?"

The lopsided smile pulled at Solo's lips as he recognized the uneasiness in Luke's features. "Shouldn't take too long. We got her away from it pretty quick -- " He quickly stifled a chuckle as Leia ran gentle, caressing fingers under Luke's shirt.

"I mean -- me -- "

"You're human, kid, roll with the punches. She'll understand."

Luke eased Leia into a gentle embrace then paused at the amusement he recognized in Solo's voice. He groaned. "I'll bet."

"Just follow your instincts -- and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Luke moaned at the spacer's banter. "That's what I'm afraid of. Dammit, Han, do you know what she's doing to me?"

A touch of pity flickered in hazel eyes. Solo turned and swung the door open for the young rebel. "Yeah, kid," he admitted softly. "I know."

* * * *

Han Solo eased the blaster into place on his hip and flicked the thong from the weapon's scope mount as he moved purposefully toward the long, low dwelling whence they had exited hurriedly moments before. His mind was filled with uneasy thoughts.

It was nothing he could put his finger on directly. All he had to go on was a feeling, a gut feeling, that he had had to rely on a lot in the past. It was good enough for him but he knew he would have to have more to convince Leia when she recovered and realized what a shambles they had made of her mission.

A dark figure moved out of the silent shadows before him, and his hand streaked toward the holstered blaster. He stayed his hand as he recognized the slender figure of Labee Ono. She motioned him silently toward her, a finger to her lips as she moved into the heavy undergrowth at the edge of the compound.

Solo glanced over his shoulder, the night silent around him -- too silent. The hairs on the back of his neck raised in warning. He drew his blaster, thumbed the toggle to kill and cautiously followed the young woman into the darkness, silently cursing himself for a fool.

He pushed through the heavy darkness of the fragrant undergrowth, until he was aware of the figure he followed stepping into a clearing. She stopped before the shady edges of a peaceful lagoon and turned to await him.

Solo studied the undergrowth before him, then stepped warily out to meet the Mandarian.

"You can holster your weapon. We are alone."

Solo glanced around the closed lagoon then hesitantly complied to her softly voice command. "Where's Re-Dav ?"

"With Lacy," she whispered softly.

"That little girl at the table with us?" Solo commented in disbelief.

Labee nodded. In the flow of the moonlight, twin tracks of silver stained her cheeks. Solo reached out a gentle finger and touched the wetness of her tears. "The time of fulfillment -- the continuation of life," he repeated her words softly. "You said them tonight with reverence and the rightness of your beliefs. Tears seem out of place, Labee. Why?"

She lowered her head, avoiding the tenderness of the Corellian's words. He lifted her chin with a gentle hand. "Labee, look at me."

The Mandarian maiden glanced up sharply at the hardness that had touched Solo's voice. "You knew about the drinks, didn't you?"

"M'laka is a native -- "

"And the Joy Juice?"

Puzzlement touched her features. "Joy Juice?"

"There was something else in the M'laka, I recognized the taste and the smell. Who put it there?"

She avoided his gaze, her voice low. "There was nothing that did not belong -- it's part of Festival."

Solo frowned. Could he have been wrong? Perhaps Mandara' fruit, distilled long enough, mixed with herbs of a type he was unfamiliar with, could have produced a drink with similar qualities. And it did fit into the rumors he'd heard of Mandara, and the holos he had seen dealing with their rites. Was he being overly suspicious?

Again he was reminded of the importance of their mission to Mandara. He studied the beautiful figure of the Mandarian, and he felt the beverage heightening his very human desires. He reached for her and she came willingly into his arms. Or did she? His head roared with the blood fever of longing aas he tilted her head and kissed her gently at first, then harder as he felt the fever building. Again, he felt something within the woman reject his advances.

He swore at his all too male weaknesses to dispel the desires that screamed for release. He forced himself away from her. There were tears in his dark eyes and something else -- fear. He filled the soft night air with heated Corellian execrations as he forced his desires down, cursing his lack of control over the power of the drugs in his system.

"You are able to overcome the -- Perhaps I am not pleasing to you?"

"Dammit, woman I want you so much I -- " Solo groaned, then his eyes hardened with ironclad determination. "I don't take what ain't freely given."

"Our feast is a time of renewal ... "

Solo swore softly. "Where have I heard that before?"

"A time of joy. We revere life. If this works, this time, how many more deaths will we be responsible for?"

"What? Woman, you lost me. Are you all right?"

Labee Ono looked up, fear again meeting his questioning gaze. "You are so different. I thought I could do this and not feel the -- shame -- the wrongness. You are not Mandarian. It would be done. He would be gone and we would be left in peace again, to our ways, our world left uncontaminated as it was before .... "

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Solo mumbled. He pushed Labee away from him. "Labee, tell me about Re-Dav. Is he Mandarian? "

The maiden lowered frightened eyes but her soft reply reached the suspicious Corellian. "No."

Solo swore as alarms clanged again sharply in his subconsciousness. "Who is he, where's he from?"

"I don't know." She read his disbelief. She touched his arm hesitantly. "We know him only as Re-Dav. Some have said he takes his name from his Master."

"His Master? Have you seen him?"

She shook her head. "He comes at first light." Sudden realization widened her eyes. "You must leave -- please -- I don't know what is to be done with you. They didn't expect you. Re-Dav fears Corel -- "

"Corellians?" Solo spoke the word softly.

"Men of your world?"

"Yeah. Who did they expect?"

"The Princess Organa. Re-Dav was very upset when she didn't come alone, or without -- aides?"

Solo nodded. "I'll bet he was. Re-Dav, he's Imperial?"

"He is from that which is known as Empire. The ones who have closed our world with the lights in the sky."

Solo nodded absently as he thought over the woman's words. "A damned trap -- Imperial nastiness." His thoughts filled in several pieces to the puzzle. "He wanted us separated -- bedded down comfortably and ready for pick up at dawn."

"Yes."

"And the clothes -- I must have upset him when I didn't leave my blaster in my room tonight," Solo thought aloud. "Thanks to you we've got time to get out of here." He stopped. "There's more, isn't there?"

"It's nothing. You must leave before Re-Dav .... "

"Labee, you said it earlier, Mandarians revere life. This time is a time of joy and fulfillment. You wouldn't have done this willingly. What did Re-Dav threaten?"

"Our family compounds are under guard. If we had not done as we were told, they would have been killed and our world opened to slavers."

Solo swore hotly. "They can't do that, Labee. As powerful as the Empire is, they can't throw open a closed world to that kind of oppression. Your world is situated in the middle of their defence corridors -- they wouldn't want that kind of attention centered here. It's a bluff -- a nasty Imperial type bluff."

"You are sure of this?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I'm sure. 'Sides, there's no reason for Re-Dav to think you squelched his trap. You did everything you were told to do. He'll just blame it on the damned suspicious nature of a Corellian." A contemplating light touched his hazel eyes. "Are there any more Imperials here in the compound?"

"No. They felt more would lead to suspicious questions. He would only set up the plans, then await his Master's arrival before the three of you were to be taken."

"You've aroused my curiosity, woman, but I don't think I'll wait around to meet the guy." He smiled and gently touched his lips to hers. "Now I want you to go wherever it is you should be. We'll say goodbye here -- and thanks. The rest is up to us. I want you clear of this."

* * * *

Han worked his way cautiously through the silent compound, avoiding the few Mandarians who wandered about the open areas. His blaster in a tight-fisted hold, he paused, then crossed the open space between buildings and let himself into their quarters.

Luke stood before the bed, a pale, obviously ill-tempered Alderaani glaring at him as she stood on very shaky legs.

"Oh, you two have a lot of explaining to do! Gods, what was in that drink? Where the hell have you been?" She turned and glared at the Corellian, and her eyes widened at the sight of his drawn blaster. "Oh hell, don't tell me you've shot someone?"

"Not yet. We're getting out of here -- now!"

"Oh no -- " Leia stalked unsteadily toward the tall spacer. "I don't know what *you've* been drinking, but -- "

"You sure you want to pursue that line of argument?" Solo snapped. "Seems like I remember a certain Princess snuggling up real cozy to -- "

Leia groaned. "What was that stuff?"

"Fatalina Joy Juice."

"You're kidding! Where would they get ... "

"Luke, we haven't got time for this." Solo pulled the Mandarian shirt off and grabbed his own, noticing that Luke had already changed back into his desert shirt. "The *Falcon* lifts in ten minutes and we're going to be on her."

"Nothing's been decided! We can't leave!" Leia protested hotly.

"Yes it has," Solo refuted, his eyes aflame with a no-nonsense light that Leia chose to ignore. "*I've* decided -- we're leaving."

"Oh no, Solo, not this time."

"Luke, will you get Her Royalness out that door before I do something we'll both regret later?"

Leia stopped Luke with a hard, threatening look. "I'm not moving a step until you tell me what ... "

"It's a trap!" Solo swore contemptuously. "An Imperial trap! "Re-Dav is Imperial. His orders are to capture you -- dead or alive, he ain't gonna be too particular."

Leia shot him a look of total astonishment. "You're crazy. It must be combat fatigue! I should have let you go on that leave. You need it -- you're seeing Imperials behind every -- "

Solo mumbled something under his breath that sounded strangely like an apology. He doubled up a fist and struck the young woman on the point of her pretty chin. She crumbled into his arms. He lifted her, cradling her easily against his chest. He turned smoldering hazel eyes onto a speechless Jedi. "Don't you give me any trouble. I can only carry one of you."

Luke's hand drifted to the hilt of his sabre as Solo's gaze hardened. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Let's get moving."

Solo drew a deep breath and hurried after the young rebel. "Thank the Maker for good Tatooine sense. Damn, if we get out of this alive, she'll probably have me shot -- if she doesn't do it herself."

Solo rounded a corner of the hut and bumped into Luke. "Keep an eye peeled for Re-Dav-- until his reinforcements get here at first light, he's on his own."

"Han, that's not long from now!"

"And you wondered why I wasn't going to stand there and debate the subject with Her Royalness! Let's move!"

Luke eased into the open, the unactivated sabre in his left hand as he led the way toward the darkened hull of the Corellian freighter. Only silence greeted their approach. Han shifted his cumbersome burden, missing the assurance of his blaster which had to remain holstered while he carried the Princess.

In the open area of the compound, halfway to the berthed vessel, the figure in his arms struggled to get down. "Luke, hold up," Han hissed as he allowed Leia to slip out of his arms. Her feet touched ground and he steadied her.

There was a fury in the Alderaani's glare he didn't care to put into words. "How dare you!"

He clamped an urgent hand over her mouth and moved his lips close to her ear. "Settle down," he hissed and tightened his hand. "One more word and you'll take another nap." He groaned as he realized the mistake he had made in his voice threat.

She bit him. He swore and released her.

"Is that so!" She stepped down hard on his instep, and Solo bit off the painful exclamation before it became audible.

"Leia, hurry!"

"Luke, do you realize what he's doing? He's messing up our chances of alliance with the Mandarians!"

"Leia, trust him. I do."

Solo's glance took in the silence of the compound, their voices unnervingly loud in the early hours before dawn.

"You're both crazy." Leia paused, a smug expression pulling at her pretty mouth as she looked past Solo and Luke. "Well, maybe now I'll get some straight answers."

Han swore, angry at himself for not seeing the silent figure that had disengaged itself from the *Falcon's* shadow. He reached for his blaster.

"Oh no, you don't!" Leia grabbed his arm, stopping his draw.

Solo's eyes widened as he saw Re-Dav raise a blaster and train it on the slender figure of Leia Organa. He yelled as he read the Imperial's deadly intentions, his finger tightening on the trigger. "Luke, take him!"

Han shoved Leia roughly toward the ground, as he threw himself into the line of fire, his body between Re-Dav and the young woman. His hand streaked for his holstered weapon.

The blaster in Re-Dav's hand spit its beam of death, mingled with the hiss of Luke's activated sabre.

Han felt the searing pain of the energy beam tear across his ribs as he fell. He jerked his blaster up and fired. Luke sabre deflect Re-Dav's next shot from the Corellian's body. Han's shot took the spy down. The man convulsed, jerked then lay still.

"Han?"

Solo struggled to his feet, reading the concern in Luke's eyes as the young rebel focussed on his wounded side. "It's nothing -- just looks bad -- let's get out of here! We're running out of time, it's getting light!"

Luke whirled, reached out and helped Leia to her feet, rushing her toward the *Falcon*. She made no attempt to slow their progress .

Solo brushed past her as he keyed in the hatch close sequence and hurried to the cockpit. The *Falcon's* main engines were warming when he dropped into the pilot's seat. "Let's get the hell out of here before she decides to get difficult again."

Luke wisely remained silent as he brought the *Falcon* into lift-off mode.

Solo took the yoke, hit his main thrusters and the *Falcon* lifted gracefully from Mandarian soil. He reached up and swiftly activated the deflector shield, angling them fore. He shoved the gain to maximum.

He was acutely aware of the small figure who crossed behind Luke and dropped into the navigational seat behind him. He turned to his navicomputer, pointedly ignoring the young woman as his flipped in his desired coordinates. "Keep your eyes open. I figure the Imperial slug'll use the same corridor we did."

"You're paranoid, you know that, Solo?" Leia commented drily.

"Maybe," Solo fenced as he glanced again across his board, "but I sure in hell have enough sense to know when someone's about to fry me!"

"You were the one going for a blaster!" she defended hotly. "He wasn't shooting at me!"

"Luke, have you got anything on those sensors yet?"

"No. The corridor's open."

A light flashed on the navicomputer. Solo whirled, obtained the jump data and snapped it into his guidance system.

"A blip -- 1200!"

Solo grabbed the yoke as Luke relinquished control. He banked the freighter sharply to port and pushed her toward hyper speed velocity as an Imperial cruiser approached them from the defence corridor above Mandara.

"Her shields have snapped on. She's going to battle stations!"

"A few more seconds .... "

"It could have been a mistake -- " Leia's voice trailed off as the huge cruiser fired, the energy beams speeding toward them.

Solo swore as he pushed a silver lever forward and another back. "Why don't you ask them, sister? Maybe they're just lost and shooting at us to pass the time of day!"

The star field dappled, blurred then winked out as the Imperial energy bolt passed through empty space. The Falcon went hyper.

Han Solo drew a deep breath, closed his eyes and leaned gratefully back into his seat. The silence of hyper lulling his tension, and he felt the first throbs of his burned ribs. He winced as he felt his blood soaked shirt pull across the wounded area. He waited patiently for the barrage of anger he had grown to expect from Leia Organa.

"You two have got a lot of explaining to do," she started.

The cockpit remained strangely silent as she glanced first from one man to the other. "Well?" She glanced at the blond Jedi who found something of sudden interest on the long range sensors which were inoperative during hyperspace. "You do realize we've lost all chances of that alliance -- "

"A diplomatic trip ... " Solo's voice interrupted softly. His eyes remained closed.

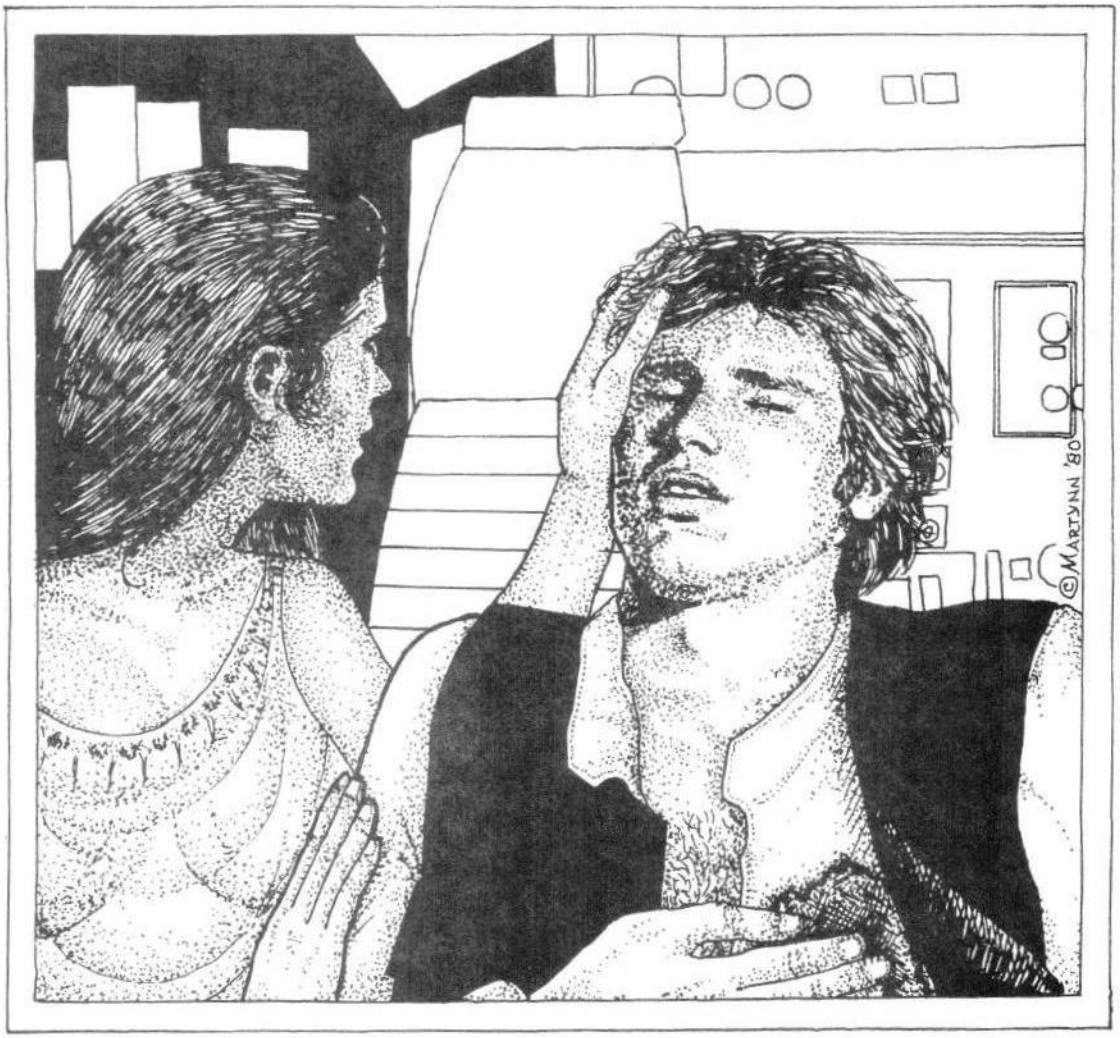
"Just because you two started seeing Imperials behind every rock -- "

"In and out -- nothing to it ... "

"That feast was a diplomatic disaster -- almost turning into an orgy -- you and Labee kissing over drinks -- " Leia continued her tirade.

"This won't interfere ... a holiday in paradise ... "

Leia paused as a careless hand encountered a very sore spot on her chin. She winced, touched it again and anger flared as memory ripened. "This time, Han Solo you've just gone too far!" She glared at a very uncomfortable Jedi. "And you! You just stood there and let him -- "



"Deck you," Solo finished softly.

"Deck me," Leia finished, glaring with murderous intent at the resting Corellian.

"For all their faults, you can always count on an Alderaani to stand by her word. 'It's not that kind of a trip, Han' -- those words shall be forever etched in my mind. 'You won't get shot at -- '"

"Next you'll try to make me believe you saved my life when you pushed me down!"

"Gratitude is so refreshing in Alderaanis," Solo quipped in a voice feigning a growing weakness.

"Don't give me that, fly-boy!" she snapped. "If Re-Dav had been shooting at me he would have hit you!"

Luke groaned under his breath as he head the hotheaded young senator step into the carefully laid trap. He grinned as Solo closed it with expert efficiency. "You gonna talk me to death or -- " Solo paused for the proper emphasis, then continued weakly, " -- just let me bleed to death."

Leia Organa turned suspicious eyes on the Corellian. He lay strangely quiet, alluringly vulnerable before her outrage. "What?"

Luke smiled and reluctantly took sides. "He stepped into Re-Dav's line of fire. He took the shot that would have hit you."

Solo turned his seat just enough for the suddenly pale princess to see the blood caked shirt plastered to his blaster burned side. Gods -- " She glanched. "Han, why didn't you say something?"

"You will -- tell Chewie -- I tried to -- get there -- "

"He *was* shooting at me! You saved my life ... " She stumbled to her feet, an anxious hand gently brushing the Corellian's hair from his forehead. It was a gentle, caring touch.

"I feel numb -- I think I'm fading -- "

"Luke, watch him! I'm going after the medikit. How could you just sit there, knowing he was hurt and not do something?"

"You'll see that -- the *Falcon* gets to Kashyyyk -- Chewie'll know -- what to do .... "

"Han," Luke interjected softly.

"'S'okay, kid. You'll make it -- without me -- "

"Han, she's gone. You can turn it off, I'm not buying it."

One hazel eye opened, checked the empty navigational station then closed again. The lopsided smile pulled at his mouth. "No, but she is," he replied happily. "Whatcha think, Luke? If I play my cards right, I could get another medal out of this -- maybe even a little reward ... "

"How about forgiveness for decking a senator?" The words were softly spoken. The Corellian's eyes shot open, and he settled his gaze on the soft, pale and very sincere features of Leia Organa. He sighed in contentment.

"Yeah, I figure that covers it nicely."

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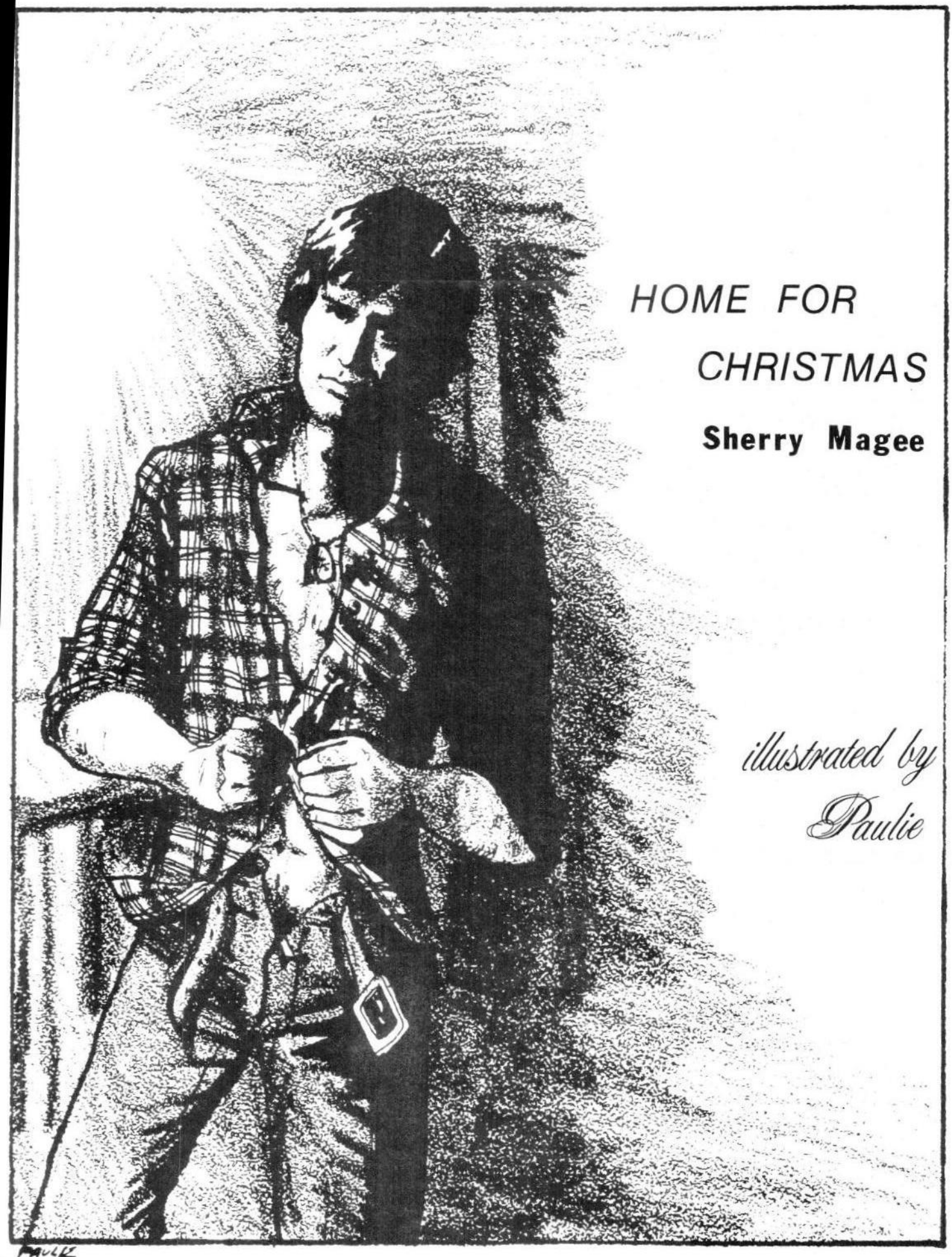
# *Media West ** Con*

## May 22-25

Just a reminder to those interested: MEDIA*WEST CON is still on for May 22-25, and they are still accepting memberships. The rates have gone up -- $13 and 3 s.a.s.e.s or 45¢ until May 10. NO memberships will be taken at the door, and membership is limited and filling fast, so get the money in soon. It sounds like it's going to be as much fun as its predecessors -- to quote from the flyer: "This convention is meant as a gathering place for fans of any and all persuasions. Like all the past SeKWester*Cons, it will contain what you folks bring to it." The hotel is lovely, with a pool, restaurants and anything else you could want, and it's located in a good area of town (i.e., within easy access of fast food places). There will be a banquet, where the Fan Quality awards will be presented, costume call and all kinds of activities planned. If you have ideas for panels please submit them to Paula Smith, 507 Locust St., Kalamazoo, Mich. 49007. Anything else, including inquiries, memberships, problems, etc, should be sent to Lori Chapek-Carleton, 5132 JoODon Drive, E. Lansing Mich. 48823. We will have a table at the con (sharing with Paulie), and we will post our room number, so stop by, say hello and join the FordFest! See you there!



# HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

**Sherry Magee**

*illustrated by Paulie*

*"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know..."*

Ken Boyd grimaced and switched off the radio. "White Christmas!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Try shovelin' your way through four foot drifts, buddy. You'll wish yourself some place nice and warm -- like Florida." With a final reproachful glance at the radio he finished buttoning his red-checked, wool hunting jacket, and tugged his NAPA cap over his disheveled brown hair.

The crystal cold air of Christmas eve chilled away the last traces of sleep from his mind. Letting the trailer door slam, he squinted at the watery sunlight playing hide and seek with his eyes through the bare branches of an oak tree. It was midmorning, almost noon.

"I'm late," he murmured, mouth twisting as he anticipated the reception he would receive at the house. "Gotta watch that beer." He'd lost count of the number he'd drunk before going to bed -- enough to drown the nightmares, and enough to cause him to sleep late and miss breakfast with the relatives. Well, it wouldn't be the first time, but he knew his grandparents would have liked him to be there on Christmas Eve.

"The Little Saint Nick" blared from a transistor radio propped on a distant stump cheering on the two capped and mittened figures careening down the nearby slope. At the foot of the hill they tumbled off the sled and towed it up again, agruing to see who would control the next ride. Watching them Ken experienced a wild impulse to run up the hill and join them, but he let the idea dissipate. Although he liked the twins, Jason and Kurt, a gulf of thirteen years seperated them, and by mutual, unspoken agreement they avoided eachother. His cousins were involved with themselves, rock music, and anticipation of Christmas.

Christmas. All the stores in Sedalia had been decorated for weeks with tinsel and holiday gifts. The television abounded with specials stressing peace, goodwill, and the joys of family gatherings. Ken felt only loneliness and isolation. As each member of the family arrived, he grew more and more tense and nervous. They intruded into his world every year at this time, making demands on him, asking embarassing questions like, "What are you *doing* with yourself, Kenny?", demanding his participation in the gossip and small talk at the table. Uncle George would point out that the house needed repairs, that the farm was too big for Ken's grandparents, now in their 70's. If he had his way the place would be up for sale by spring. He scowled silent criticisms at Ken, but they had barely spoken since the incident in August. Aunt Mary fluttered and fussed about admonishing Ken to tuck in his shirt or take his cap off, while her sister, Polly, complained about the cold and how things were more expensive every year. It would be a relief when the holidays were over and they were gone. Maybe the dreams would stop again.

Assuming the impassive expression he tried to maintain in their presence, Ken started for the porch when the crunch of tires on snow caught his attention. A blue and white Chevy sedan clawed its way up the icy driveway and lurched to a hault by the house. A ski jacketed arm waved vigorously, and the door flew open almost before the vehicle stopped.

"Kenny! Hey, Kenny!"

A grin split his face. He raised an arm and quickened his pace to be met more than halfway by his cousin Sandy. Her short blond hair, almond-brown eyes and lithe form were so muffled in jacket, cap and scarf that she resembled a short blue bear. Her enthusiastic hug almost bowled him over, but he withstood the assault, even managed to pick her up and swing her around in a half circle before losing his footing. They hugged each other for support and from affection, both laughing.

"Whoooeee! You made it!"

"By noon, even! I drove like you. Looks like everyone's here."

"Oh yeah. Place is alive with people, 'cept for Phil. He's not here yet."

"My brother'd be late for his own funeral unless there was a commission in it," Sandy laughed. She peered up at Kenny intently. "My folks been giving you a bad time?"

Ken's shrug was noncommittal, and his cousin's head shook in sympathy. "Dad's mouth again, right?" She poked him playfully in the ribs and changed the subject. "Every time I see you you're thinner. You were boney enough last summer."

Pretending to double over, Ken grabbed her, lifted her up while she squealed and struggled until he lost his footing and they both ended up in the snow. They lay there laughing, dumping handfuls of snow on each other till Ken sat up and asked, "How's the car run?"

"Fine, just fine."

"Did you winterize it like I told you?"

"If I hadn't, would I be here today? Come see." Sandy bounded to her feet and caught Ken's hand. When he was standing she barely reached his chin, but she dragged him over to the Chevy with the determination of a bulldog. "Listen, you've got to show me how to change my own plugs and points. The garage is gonna charge me an arm and a leg to keep this thing serviced when I can buy all the stuff and do the job myself."

"I guess we can put it up in the barn. You got the parts?"

"Right here." Leaning into the back seat the brough forth a paper sack and rattled it. Ken took it, inspected the contents and nodded.

NAPA

"This'll do."

"Well, we have to do it before Friday 'cause I'm gonna leave then to go skiing with some friends." Catching his forlorn expression as she thurst the sack into the back seat, she added, "Come with me. We're renting a cabin. There's plenty of room."

But Ken only shook his head. Sandy jumped to tug at his cap. "You wear that thing even in winter? I'd think your brains'd freeze."

"I'm alright. How are you? I mean, vet school still goin' okay?"

"Should make honor roll. I've been bustin' my butt, let me tell you!" An infectious grin flashed from beneath the ski cap. "And I love it! Help me get my things inside, then I want to see Britches and King. Have you been working them?"

Ken laughed. "Not in this I haven't." And to forestall her protest he hurried to add, "I've had 'em out every day or so till the snow got to deep. They're both fine, shaggier than a coupla buffalo."

"Okay. I just don't want 'em to get too stale. Britches can forget everything she's supposed to know if she goes all winter without work. Maybe we can saddle them up and take 'em out on the ridge like we used to."

Chattering happily she loaded Ken up with a box of present while he smiled, a bit dismayed by her energy and enthusiasm. Just like Sandy, he thought all sunshine and eagerness to share. He slowed his pace to prevent her from running to keep up with his long-legged stride. She still reminded him of the curly-headed nuisance who had dogged his and Phil's footsteps calling, "Wait up!" No matter how they had tried to avoid her, she had injected herself relentlessly into their activities.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Kenny?" The question again.

"Nothin' much," he mumbled, hazel eyes averted. "Just workin' around here, you know how it is."

"No I don't. You never write me, and you promised. I wrote you four times at least."

"Three," countered Ken.

"Well, three then. That's two more than I wrote my folks. I thought you were going to see Pierce Hamilton about a job at his garage. What happened, didn't you get it?"

They were at the front door, and Ken was saved the embarrassment of a reply as Sandy's attention was claimed by parents and grandparents, who flug the door open calling out hellos and Christmas greetings. The two young people were enveloped and ushered inside to a house that mingled the smells of age with those of coffee and spice cookies.

Ken drew away and let Sandy have her moment, watching while the family fussed over her and admonished her for not writing, the box of presents forgotten in his arms. She did have a way of brightening up the place, he thought. Even Uncle George managed a momentary smile and tolerated her comments on his spreading paunch with good humor. His beefy build was a sign of the prosperity of his dealership, a prosperity that paid her school bills, he reminded her. And if his hair was thinning it was from worry over a daughter and sone who showed no inclination to marry and make him a grandfather. Now his wife claimed her daughter for a kiss, and the look of perpetual discontent left her face. Ken was struck by how much mother and daughter resembled one another: same blond hair, facial shape and coloring, same slender build. At least Sandy resembled someone in her family. Ken was too tall and lanky to look like any of the Boyds, though they said he had his father's hair and eyes, and most of his shiftless ways. *Just like that Jerry Jeff Walker song,* he thought. *I'm "Contrary to Ordinary".*

His grandmother withdrew from the group surrounding her granddaughter, blue ski jacket over one arm, then her sharp grey eyes spotted Ken.

"Why, there you are. We were about ready to send someone to look for you, dear. You missed breakfast."

"I overslept. I'm sorry." *She looks tired,* he thought. *Stiffer, too.* The arthritis was rounding her shoulders even more than usual.

"Well, I saved you some oatmeal on the back of the stove, and there's orange juice, or I could fix you some eggs and toast if you'd rather."

"I'm not hungry, Gram, thanks." *She'll wear herself out feeding all this company. She'd feed me ten times a day if I'd let her.*

"But you have to eat something ... " came the expected protest.

His grandfather came to his rescue. "Boy says he ain't hungry, hon, but I'll wager your granddaughter could use a cup of coffee and maybe some of those cookies."

"You bet, Gram," Sandy agreed with a wink at Ken.

"Why don't you put those presents around the tree," directed his grandfather. As Ken knelt to comply a gnarled hand caught his arm and he found himself looking up into Pappy's dark eyes. Though he was in his seventies, a lifetime of farm labor was still reflected in the breadth of his shoulders and chest and his well-muscled arms. There was strength in his grip. "Try not to be late tomorrow," he said sternly. "It's Christmas." His grandson nodded guiltily before turning back to the tree.

Nearly ten feet tall, the pine tree dominated the old fashioned living room, splendid with lights and glass ornaments that had covered similar trees in Christmases past, but which always seemed both new and familiar. The clean pine fragrance was strong as Ken worked to tuck the multitude of packages about the lower limbs. He felt hands on his shoulders as Sandy used him to brace herself and inhale deeply.

"This is terrific! Pappy, did you and Kenny cut this one out behind the ridge?"

Turning in the doorway the old farmer called, "We sure did, honey."

"I think it's the best one yet."

"You say that every year," her father snapped, and she turned in surprise at the discontent in his tone. "Come say your hellos to Great-grandmother Boyd."

"Sure, Dad. I didn't know she was here."

In an armchair by the fire sat ninety-five-year-old Great-grandmother Boyd, asleep, her toothless mouth open, her head at an uncomfortable angle. She seemed tiny, mummified by the bathrobe in which she was wrapped. Sandy approached and bent to kiss her withered cheek. "Merry Christmas, Grandgram."

For a moment nothing happened, then the head righted itself and the eyes opened slightly. Great-grandmother Boyd showed no sign of recognition. She stared as if transfixed at an undetermined point on the floor, blue-veined hands plucking at the afghan across her knees.

George Boyd stepped forward in annoyance. "it's Sandy, Grandgram," he declared loudly. There was no responce. He straightened to glare at his daughter, then at Ken who joined them around the chair.

With a glance of apprehension at his uncle, Ken knelt to take the old woman's hands and repeat the words softly. A hint of a smile creased the old face and she gripped his strong, slim fingers.

"Why, Kenny, she knows you!" There was delight in Sandy's tone. "Look, Dad, Mom. She knows Kenny."

Her father snorted and turned away. He mouthed something *sotto voce* that caused his wife to flush and whisper, "Please, George!"

Sandy looked between her parents, Ken and her great-grandmother in dismay. Then her mother quickly moved to cover the uncomfortable moment.

"Come on, Sandy. Aunt Polly's in her room wrapping presents, says it's warmer in there. She'll want to see you. And Jason and Kurt are somewhere."

"Probably sledding," Sandy added. She cast a last worried glance at her father before following her mother out of the room.

Ken remained kneeling in front of his great grandmother, hands imprisoned in her fragile ones, shoulders tense against the assault he feared from his uncle. It was with relief that he heard the heavy footsteps leave the room. He stood, freed his hands, and realized that he'd been holding his breath. The conflict between his uncle and great-grandmother had knotted his stomach muscles, and it took him a moment to relax.

A glass of water rested nearby on a tray. He got it, held it to the old woman's lips so that liquid trickled into her mouth. He was relieved when the resulting swallow wasn't followed by a coughing spasm. A kleenex cleaned her chin, and he made certain the afghan was tucked warmly about her before he hadded another log to the fire. It was the last one.

The woodbox on the back porch was nearly empty, too. He had intended to fill it yesterday, but somehow he had never gotten around to it. Well, it would get him out of the house.

The briskness of the air invigorated Ken, dissipating the the depression that had started to descend on his spirits. He stood before the woodpile loading his arms and decided against drafting the twins.

Snowforts were under construction, and the boys were busy stockpiling ammunition for the coming battle. Jason's ever-present radio had been given a seat of honor on top of his fort so that tactics were decided to the steady beat of the local pop station. A smile tugged at Ken's lips; they were a pair alright, like he a Phil used to be. He'd load the woodbox alone, no problem.

On the back porch he dropped the load of logs into the vast woodbox and stood back to admire his work. He had completed it the month after Jack had stopped by and he'd given him the Camaro. It was high and broad enough to hold a half cord of firewood, yet not so deep that his grandfather would strain himself lifting out the logs. The boards had been carefully fitted and sanded, and two coats of sealer had been applied. His grandparents had been very pleased. For weeks Ken had walked around wrapped in the warm glow of his accomplishment. It still made him feel good just looking at it.

It was on his third trip that he became aware of angry voices coming from the pantry.

"I don't know why we come here. Every Christmas it gets worse and worse."

"Now, George, it isn't that bad. They're old, and it means so much to them to have us all here. The boys love it."

"That's because they don't understand. Why mother brings her here is beyond me. She doesn't even recognize any of us, much less what day of the year it is."

"Well, she seemed to know Kenny, would hardly let go of his hands."

"They're two of a kind. He's about as useless as she is. Now, don't look at me like that. It's true. That kid hasn't been all here since he got back from 'Nam. He's quit, Mary. Just quit cold."

"George, what if he hears you?"

"It's about time he heard somebody. I tell you my mother has turned this place into a refuge for mental cases. Great-grandmother just sits and drools, and Mother has to keep diapers on her like a baby. You saw her at breakfast. Can't even eat baby food, just chokes on everything."

"The doctors say she's lost the gag reflex. Food can just as easily enter her lungs as her stomach. She can't last much longer. It breaks my heart to see her."

"And it turns my stomach to watch her spit up her food while I'm trying to enjoy mine. She's dying, Mary. And if she chokes and dies here, Mother will never forgive herself. Dad watches her every minute ... it can't be good for his heart, either."

"I know, but it's so hard for them to believe she won't be like she used to. She was so spry for so long. If only she didn't smell so, now. Oh, well, they only bring her home on special occasions. Ken drove them into Sedalia to pick her up Sunday afternoon. They'll take her back after Christmas."

"There it is again!" If Ken had any guts he'd refuse to take them. He must be able to see that it's not good for his grandmother, but that kid's in such a dream state most of the time it's a wonder he can find his shoes."

"I think he's just inconsiderate. But your father says he's a little better. After all he did build that woodbox and did some repairs around the place. That's more than he's done in a long time. Maybe he's coming out of it. Be patient with him, George. You know how much he always looked up to you after Ken left."

"He was a good kid then, gutsy. He used to drive that care of his like a maniac, go hunting and fishing with me. Why, he practically rebuilt my Ford. Now I hardly know him. Whe we were here in August for Mother's birthday ... "

"I know, you told me .... "

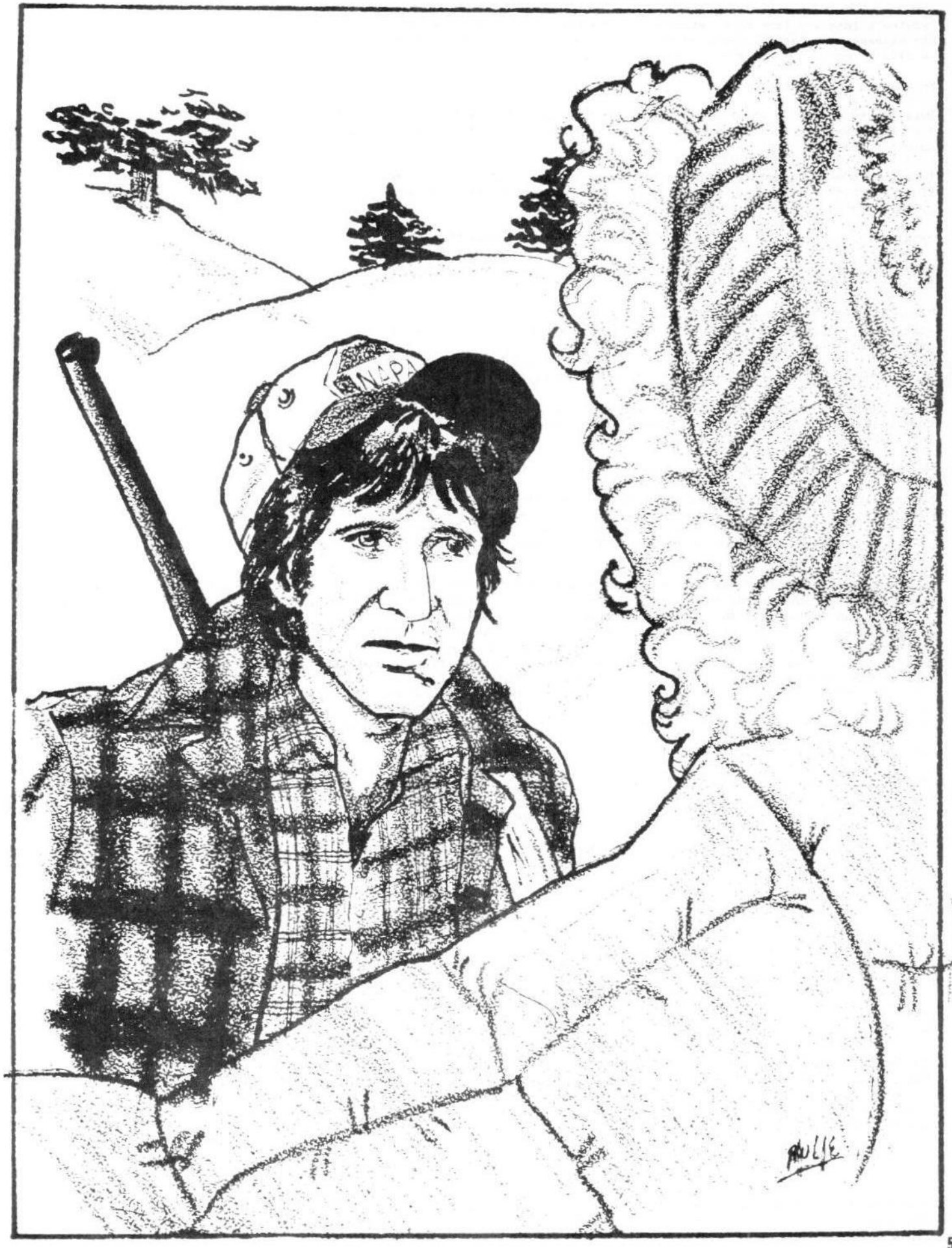
"I mean, there we were in front of Anderson's Pharmacy when the Channel 9 airwatch copter flew over. That kid let out a yell, dove for the pavement and dragged me with him. He crawled into a doorway, all huddled up like a rabbit in the brush, shaking and sweating. People were staring at us. Afterward he never said a word, just got back in the car and wouldn't come out. I tell you he's crazy, a freak. I don't like for him to be around the kids."

Ken stood rooted to the concrete floor, found himself beginning to tremble. Tears stung his eyes and he flung the logs into the woodbox and bolted into the cold sanctuary of the afternoon.

The ridge was cold, unwarmed by the pallid winter sun, unprotected from the wind as it stood overlooking the old farmhouse. Ken welcomed the chill into his bones. There was comfort in numbness, and the last thing he wanted to do was feel anything. He slouched on the end of a half buried fallen tree, finishing the last can of beer in the day pack at his feet, and willed the cold to absorb him.

His headlong flight from the porch had taken him to the barn, then back to the trailer where he had grabbed a few things and headed out to tramp the afternoon away in the futile attempt to dissolve the swelling pain generated by his uncle's words. Deep into the woods he'd plunged, then down through the pasture on the other side, across the creek, then back across again until finally he had come almost full circle to climb the ridge that rose behind the farmhouse. The walk had helped, the beer in the pack had helped even more; yet tension still coiled around his stomach and kept his knuckles white where they gripped the can of Budweiser. He was waiting. The sun would set soon and the Christmas star would come out. Ken had plans for that star.

The prancing crunch of hooves in the snow together with the rhythmic snort of a horse's breath reached his ears. Sandy had found him. *Damn it*, he thought, *why can't she leave me alone? Why did she follow me?* With fixed concentration he stared straight ahead., refusing to acknowledge his cousin's approach even when he felt her mount's breath on his neck.



"You're a long way from home, stranger." The cheerful voice grated on his nerves so that he glanced at her, his expression clearly indicating that he wanted her to go away. Sandy didn't take the hint. Instead, when he didn't reply, she whistled. "Hey, remember me?"

No answer, just another glare.

Ever one to charge in where angels had to good sense not to enter, she pursued the monologue. "Alright, Doc. I'm the marshal of Dodge City an' I just tracked you down. Now, are you gonna come peaceable, or do I have to use force?"

In a sudden savage gesture, Ken leapt to his feet and flung the can down the slope, spooking the sorrel, Sage King, so that he reared and spun sideways. Sandy kept her seat, quieted the horse, then slid from the shaggy back, reins clenched in one hand.

"What's the matter with you? Are you trying to get me thrown?"

Wide hazel eyes stared at her in surprise and confusion before Ken stammered, "I ... I'm ... I didn't think .... "

"You bet your life you didn't!" She shook her head, controlling her annoyance. "Well, if you're through scaring my horse, you might like to ride back for supper. It's after four and Gran's getting ready to make oyster stew. She said we'd eat about five."

He couldn't go back there, not yet. "I'm not hungry."

Again Sandy swallowed her irritation and tried to lighten the mood. "I know it's the custom to keep watch over your flocks by night at this time of year, but all the smart sheep and shepards are home in a nice warm barn."

Ken's only response was to thrust his hands into his pockets and start along the slope away from her.

Exasperated with his stubbornness, but determined, Sandy led King around the log thinking to catch up with him. What she saw made her stop so abruptly that the horse bumped into her. Leaning against the far side of the fallen tree was the M-16 rifle Ken had brought back from Vietnam. It looked deadly and out of place in the dying light of Christmas Eve and suddenly, Sandy was afraid.

Ken had never frightened her before. Since his return from the war he had been different, withdrawn, at times a stranger, at other times just Kenny, her cousin. She attributed his silences to the fact that he'd been through a lot, wounded and all. Besides, he had always had shy, dreamy moments interspersed with other of boistrous exerberance. Four years her senior, he had been a tease and a daredevil, but she had always felt close to him, far closer than to her brother Phil. It was to Kenny that she had confided her intention to become a veternarian, and he had been the first person she had told when the University of Missouri had accepted her application. In return for the confidence, he had found and repaired the Chevy, and had agreed to work Britches and King in her absence. So when she heard stories of his arguments with their grandparents, when her parents criticized him, she had come to his defense. It was easier to ignore the fact that he never seemed to do anything, that he was always tense and suffered from uncharacteristic outbursts of anger. But the rifle was something else again.

She reached for the barrel to find Ken there before her. Snatching the weapon, he swung it out of reach.

"Watch it! There's a clip in it! Are you crazy handeling it like that?"

"Are you?" she countered. "What are you doing up here with that thing?"

"Well, if it's any of your business, I was gonna shoot out the Christmas star. I was ..." Ken trailed off in confusion and embarassment, the words sounding foolish in his ears. His cousin was staring at him in disbelief, the fear in her expression easily read. "What'd you think I was gonna do, huh? Shoot myself? You think I'm crazy enough to do that?"

"Well, what am I supposed to think? It's Christmas eve , and you take off and sit on top of a hill in the freezing snow with a rifle, for God's sake!" She reacted with guilt to the hurt and betrayal on his face,watched his long fingers open and close on the rifle. "Don't look like that, Kenny. Please."

Voice just barely audible, he mumbled, "You think I'm crazy too, don'tcha. A freak just like my uncle says."

"No, I don't, but you scared me to death with that thing. Since you got back I didn't even think you went hunting anymore."

"I don't," he stated. Removing the ammunition clip, he held it up for her to see. "Satisfied?" He set the rifle down. "Now just run along, will ya?"

"Not unless you come with me." Reins twisting in her fingers, Sandy took a deep breath before stating the reason she had come. "I know why you ran away, Kenny. Mom told me what Dad said. They saw you run from the porch."

His expression, so vulnerable, mirrored the pain and humiliation he was feeling. *Poor Kenny*, she thought, *he never could hide anything. How can he ever again assume the role of my wise older cousin?* Aloud, she added gently, "He's sorry. Dad's been driving himself crazy all afternoon, worrying, drinking. Finally, I couldn't stand it so I grabbed King and followed you."

"Said he didn't want me around the kids. As if I'd hurt 'em." The defiance and hurt in his tone stabbed at her.

"I don't know if I can explain Dad to you. He can't stand to see anything in pain, not Gran, not Grandgram -- not you. He wants everything simple like growing up means getting married and having babies...and going to war is something you do 'cause it's a job. When it's over you pick up your life and go on."

"What's he know about it?" Ken's face twisted with anger. "He was nothin' but a damn army clerk."

"None of us know anything about it 'cause you won't talk to us, Kenny. In all the times I've seen you since you've been home, you never say one word about the war. I want to understand, but how can I?"

"I didn't ask you to, I didn't ask any of you!" he shouted. How could he explain what she could never understand? "You've got no right to tell me how to run my life. Why don't you get out of here and leave me alone?"

"So you can do what? Crawl back into that trailer of yours and drink yourself to death, or worse?" She gestured at the rifle, caught herself. Yanking the ski cap off her head, she slammed it against one knee. "Listen to me. I sound just like Dad." She gathered King's reins as if to mount, but instead pressed her face against his withers.

Shifting nervously from one foot to the other, Ken berated himself silently. Why did he have to fly off the handle at her? She was only trying to help, he knew that. It wasn't her fault that she couldn't. He hated it when she was upset.

Hesitantly, he approached her, and in an awkward gesture lay his hand on her shoulder. "Don't be mad at me, Sandy, huh?"

"I'm not mad at you, Kenny. I'm mad at me." Sandy straightened, wiped a mittoned hand across her eyes. "Everytime I come back here I hope you'll be alright, that everything will be like it was when we were kids. And it never is. Everybody just starts tearing at each other. I wasn't always like this, was it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. That was a long time ago."

The sorrel stirred restlessly, stamping his hooves, and Sandy shivered. "My feet are freezing. You want to go back now?"

Her cousin shook his head.

"Well, I'm not going home til you do even if I have to stay here til spring and they have to chip me out with an ice pick." That comment brought a small smile from him, and, encouraged, she broached the subject again. "It's almost dark."

"Nights are the worst." Ken echoed Jack's comment of the previous summer, and the misery in his voice caused Sandy to drop King's reins over the end of the log and go to slip an arm about his waist.

"Not tonight. It's Christmas eve. You always loved Christmas eve." When he didn't answer, she added, "Just let it go, Kenny, just let it go."

Darkness hid Ken's expression, but one hand came up to rumple her short, blond curls affectionately. Sandy had always been the one relative who tried to put things right. How he wished she could make it work for him this time.

Below them the sun had set, the moon glowed lown on the horizon bathing the land in silver. Lights were warm in the farmhouse windows.

"It looks perfect. Just like a Christmas card."

His reply was a *non sequitur*. "I really want you to know."

"What?"

"Go home. Only...everything's different. It don't seem to be there now. It's like circle trackin'. I just go 'round and 'round and don't go nowhere."

"I know."

The gazed for a time at the peaceful scene below.

"Is Phil coming?"

Sandy stirred. "He phoned. He's closing some big deal, on Christmas eve no less. Said he'd be along tomorrow early."

Ken chuckled. "Good ol' Phil, the wheeler dealer. You remember the time he led us up on theroof to check out the chimney to see if Santa would really fit down it?"

"How could I forget it? He wanted me to make a trial run, said I was 'elf sized'. I thought Pappy was going to skin me alive for being up there."

"What was that bread Grandgram used to make, pumpkin bread?"

"Persimmon bread," she corrected. "We got a slice when we came in from sledding."

"I remember. The house smelled like it for days. Made the best cookies, too. Phil and I used to try to swipe a few in between meals. She caught us everytime. Gave us a couple, too." He made a face. "I never could stand the candied grapefruit peel, though. I used to flush it down the toilet."

"I fed mine to the horses. They liked it." Laughing, Sandy poked him in the ribs. "Hey, how come you and Phil used to send me to check out all the closets for presents?"

"We figured if you got caught, you being the youngest, and a girl, you wouldn't get whipped. You were never any good at it. Never found 'em once."

"I did so. Found a whole bunch of 'em in the linen closet, so there."

"How come you never told us?"

"I decided the surprise would be better. Besides, I was still mad at you and my brother for telling me there wasn't any Santa Claus. I must've cried for a week."

"We got our pants licked for it, too."

"Served you both right. I didn't want to know."

Ken hugged her contritely. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright." Leaning against him, Sandy said wistfully, "I wish tonight that everything could be like it was before, that Grandgram was alright again, that we could be like Jason and Kurt are, playing all the time, looking forward to everything." Voice dropping to a whisper, she added, "I wish we weren't just a houseful of strangers."

"Hey," Ken remarked, softly, surprised and uncomfortable with the expression of alienation, "you're starting to sound just like me. Isn't one of us bad enough?"

Face muffled against his jacket, Sandy mumbled, "I always did try to copy you. Think I'd learn."

He rumpled her hair again. "You still cold?"

A nod was his reply, but they continued to stand together in silence watching the shadows deepen until Ken knew he couldn't put off his return any longer. The ridge held no answers. There was nothing to do but go back home and face the family.

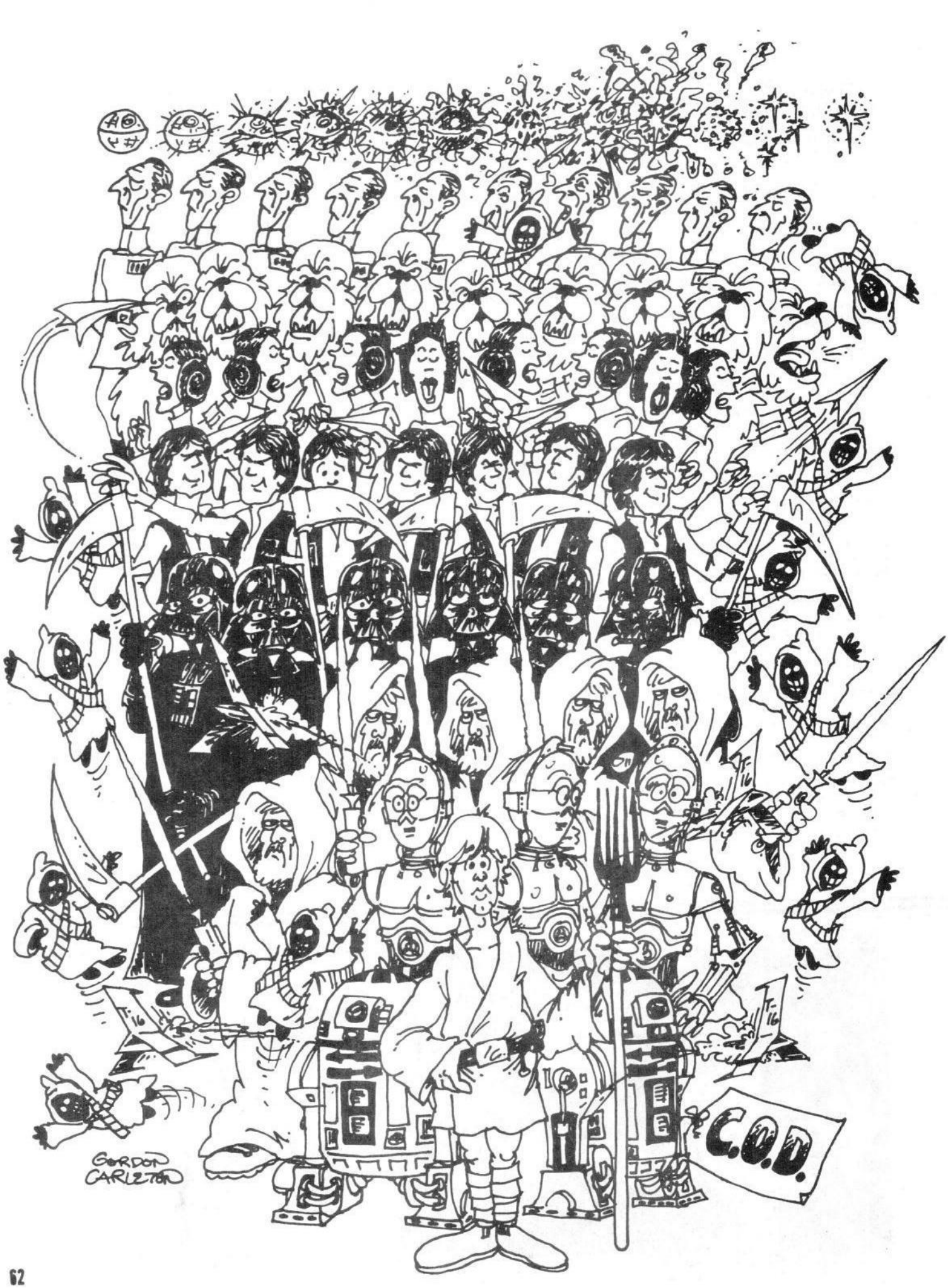
"Can I ride in front?"

Sandy sighed while she pulled on the ski cap. "Sure."

Ken collected King's reins, hesitated, then swung himself easily onto the shaggy back. After accepting his pack and rifle from Sandy, he held the horse still while she used the log to mount up behind him. The sorrel started eagerly for home.

Down the hill they rode through the pines below the ridge, hoofbeats muffled by the snow. Below them they could see the shadow of the sled as Jason and Kurt took one last ride in the moonlight. Their laughter mingled with the music from the transistor radio. Someone had switched from the rock and roll station and Christmas music was playing. The tail end of a song reached the rider's ears.

*"Christmas eve will find me where the love lights gleam,*
*I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."*


C.O.D.
GORDON CARLETON

# THE LIFE DAY CAROL

PAULA BLOCK JACKIE PACIELLO
JUDI HENDRICKS PAULA SMITH

On the first day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the second day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the third day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the fourth day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the fifth day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the sixth day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Six Sith Lords sithing
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farmboy from Tatooine.

On the seventh day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Seven Solos sailing
Six Sith Lords sithing
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the eighth day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Eight Leias lying
Seven Solos sailing
Six Sith Lords sithing
Fice Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the ninth day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Nine Wookiees wailing
Eight Leias lying
Seven Solos sailing
Six Sith Lords sithing
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the tenth day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Ten Tarkin tyrants
Nine Wookiees wailing
Eight Leias lying
Seven Solos sailing
Six Sith Lords sithing
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the eleventh day of Life Day the True Foce sent to me
Eleven Jawas jumping
Ten Tarkin tyrants
Nine Wookiees wailing
Eight Leias lying
Seven Solos sailing
Six Sith Lords sithing
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
and a farm boy from Tatooine.

On the twelfth day of Life Day of Life Day the True Force sent to me
Twelve Death Stars dying
Eleven Jawas jumping
Ten Tarkin tyrants
Nine Wookiees wailing
Eight Leias lying
Seven Solos sailing
Six Sith Lords sithing
Five Jedi Knights
Four T-16s
Three CPOs
Two R2-D2s
AND A FARM BOY FROM TATOOINE!!

# The Way Home

**Sheila Paulson**

Chewie, Leia, & Han at a Life Day Celebration

*illustrated by Joni Wagner*

"Well, it could be worse," Han Solo said. "I mean, with any luck, Luke'll be around in a day or two to get us out of here."

Chewie roared. Han had thought he knew all the Wookiee profanity there was, but this was a new one on him. Chewie, his point made, turned his back on Han and contemplated the wall.

"Well, we ain't been tortured or mind probed," Han continued, "And the food in this dump ain't bad."

*"Shut up."*

Han knew what Chewie's problem was, and since it seemed insoluble, he couldn't think of anything to say that could really help. "We'll get out of here," he tried again. "We won't be all that late. Malla will understand."

Chewie ignored him.

"Well, damn it, they know you'd be there if you could." He frowned. "They know you wouldn't miss Life Day without a good reason." Han knew that Chewie had never failed to make it home for this important holiday before. But then, he'd never been locked up in a cell on Life Day before either. Had he been free, nothing or no one could have prevented him from returning to his home and family for this all important day. But Han had accepted a cargo to Vestin, and on Vestin, he had run into a couple of 'old friends'. The fight that followed had all but destroyed the local cantina and Han and Chewie, as well as a dozen or so of the other participants in the brawl, had been incarcerated for the five day period that was customary on Vestin. It was either that or pay a huge fine and Han simply didn't have the money. He'd persuaded the authorities to let him send a message to Luke Skywalker. He hoped that Luke could scrape together enough credits to pay the fine. But Luke couldn't hope to be here in time for Chewie to get home for Life Day, and Han was feeling really bad about it.

So he said, "Hey, Chewie, I'm sorry. I know it's my fault. If I hadn't gotten into that fight, you wouldn't have wound up in jail. I don't blame you for being mad at me."

The Wookiee still didn't relent, but Han could understand that, and he told himself that was the way it should be. He knew how much this holiday mattered to Chewie and he'd blown it by getting in a stupid fight. When he'd been questioned prior to being brought to the cell, he'd tried to get the guards to relent and let Chewie go. "It ain't his fault," he'd insisted. He'd even tried to play on their sympathies by telling them about Life Day. It hadn't worked. So Chewie was stuck here and there wasn't anything to do about it.

The food slot on the wall slid open and their trays of lunch arrived. Han got up and fetched them, taking Chewbacca's tray over to him. "Dinner, Chewie." When Chewie made no attempt to take the tray, Han set it on the floor beside him and went over to the otherside of the cell. For jail food it didn't look too bad, but Han wasn't very hungry right then. For awhile he just sat looking at the tray. It was stupid not to eat, he told himself. He'd need to keep up his strength. But when he forced the food down, it tasted like sand. With a grimace of distaste, he shoved the tray back into the slot.

Chewie hadn't touched his dinner. "Hey, Chewie, come on," Han urged. "You gotta eat. Won't do you no good to starve yourself."

The Wookiee picked up the tray and Han relaxed a little. But he had relaxed too soon. Chewie turned and flung the tray at him. *"You eat it,"* he said and turned his back on Solo again.

Han looked at him sadly. He had easily ducked to avoid the tray, but he almost wished he hadn't. Chewie was mad at him with good cause and it seemed beyond Han's capability to make it right. He couldn't pay a fine of 1000 credits with only 197 credits to his name. He couldn't stage a breakout, not without weapons. So he picked up the tray and plate and shoved them back into the slot.

"Look," he tried one more time, "When we get outa here, I'll get the *Falcon* moving faster than she's ever gone before, and we--"

Chewie didn't look up. *"I'll find my own way home,"* he said.

Han was shocked into complete silence. That was something he had never expected, not even in his wildest imagination, and now that he'd heard it, he could hardly believe it. If Chewie felt badly enough about this that he'd leave Han and the *Millennium Falcon*, maybe permanently, then Han had to do something. He couldn't let that happen. He was feeling guilty enough about getting Chewie into this mess that the Wookiee's words didn't seem excessive. It was true that Chewie had made his own choice about getting into the fight, but Han had known that he'd join in--he'd expected it. He and Chewie always backed each other up--until now.

The silence went on so long that Han couldn't stand it any longer. He went over and pushed the button that would summon the guard. "I'm gonna try to talk a deal," he said to Chewie's back. "Don't know if I'll have any luck, but I'll try." Listen, pal, you might be a little late, but your family's gonna be waiting for you even so. You know they are. Guess you need a family this time of the year." Han didn't admit that he had been looking forward to Life Day with Chewie's family almost as much as Chewie had. For somebody who was as deliberately independant as Han was, that admission would have been almost impossible to make, even if Chewie hadn't been mad at him. Now that the invitation had been withdrawn, he would have cut out his tongue rather than admit it.

The guard arrived then and Han said to him, "I gotta talk to whoever's in charge. It's urgent."

The man shrugged. He happened to be in a fairly benevolent mood right then and he knew that the commandant wasn't particularly busy. "Come on then," he said

Han made a thumbs up sign at Chewie and followed him.

* * * * *

"Now let me get this straight," the commandant said. "You want me to let the Wookiee go for a mere 197 credits? That won't even cover his share of the damages."

"But you still got me," Han reminded him. "When my friend gets here to bail me out, he'll pay the rest of the fine. Or, if he doesn't, you can get it out of me in work or more jail time. Hell, I started the damn fight. I'm the one you want locked up, not Chewie."

"Why is it so important that he go free? Some business deal?"

"No, it's Life Day. That's the Wookiee's most important holiday. Chewie's got a family waiting for him. Are you a family man, Commandant?"

"Yes, I am." He thought about it for what seemed like hours to Han, but in reality it couldn't have been more than half a minute. "Well, all right," he said with a fait smile. "I may be going soft in my old age, but I'll do it. But if the rest of the fine isn't forthcoming, then, Captain Solo, you go into the work gang to work it off. It's backbreaking labor. Think about it, Captain Solo."

"I thought about it already," Han informed him. "You got a deal. And look, tell Chewie he can use the *Millennium Falcon*, will you? Seems I won't be needing it for a couple days at least."

"You can tell him yourself. You've done a lot for him. Don't you want to tell him about it yourself?"

Han shook his head. "Nah. It'll come better from somebody else. He ain't too happy with me right now."

"He will be when he hears what you have to say."

But Han remained adamant. He'd done what he could for Chewie. He wasn't going to brag about it. Chewie would have to decide what he thought about Han's actions without any prompting from Han. Maybe it was just stubbornness, and maybe he was a little scared to face Chewie again. Whichever it was, he took the easy way out.

* * * * *

The next two days were the longest Han Solo had ever spent, or so they seemed. He had no way of knowing if Chewie had taken the *Falcon* or not. He had returned to his cell to find Chewie gone. There was a chance--just a chance--that the Wookiee might have gotten home in time for Life Day, but there was no way of knowing for sure. No one communicated with him except the friendly guard, but he didn't know the answers to the questions that bothered Han. Time dragged.

He had begun to wonder if Luke was going to show up. But on the third day, when he was taken from his cell and escorted to the commandant's office, it wasn't Luke Skywalker that he found there waiting for him.

It was Princess Leia Organa.

"Well, Han, you certainly are good at getting yourself into trouble," she told him, to his annoyance.

"What're you doing here?" he demanded. He didn't sound particularly pleased to see her, but she had half expected that and it didn't bother her.

"Bailing you out," she explained. "Luke couldn't mae it; he was busy somewhere else. Well," she went on, "I don't have all day, you know. Come on, unless you want to stay here."

"Nice," he retorted. He was given back his blaster and his personal possessions and then, reluctantly, he followed her. Once outside the building she gave him a smile. "Well, Han, the Alliance bailed you out. We won't ask for the credits back, but we expect you to work it off."

"Running guns?" he asked.

"Among other things."

"Won't do you much good. I can't even pay the port fee on the *Falcon*."

"The *Falcon's* not here anyway," she told him. "You'll have to trust my piloting skill." She smiled at the thought.

But he didn't rise to the bait. "The *Falcon's* not here? Did Chewie take her?" he asked eagerly.

"So I've been told. Is that so surprising?"

Han wasn't sure. Even though he had told the commandant to pass along the word to Chewie about using the *Falcon*, he hadn't been sure that Chewie would take him up on the offer, and until now, he'd had no way of knowing that Chewie had. He knew he couldn't read anything into that, though. The *Falcon* was one of the fastest ships around. Even mad at Han, Chewie might have taken it simply to get home in time. Or it could mean that Chewie had decided to forgive him. There was no way to tell which it was. Not yet.

Then the rest of Leia's words penetrated. "Wait a minute. You're not flying me anywhere."

"I suppose you think I can't. I'm a good pilot, Han Solo, and don't you doubt it."

"Look, sweetheart, I'll do the flying."

"Not on my ship you won't. You wouldn't let me fly the *Falcon*, would you? Well, I pilot the *Starbird* -- or else you don't come along."

Han muttered something about stubborn women under his breath. Aloud he said, "Where are we going?"

"Where do you think? Kashyyyk, to get your ship back. Come on."

That made sense, but Han still went reluctantly. He wasn't sure he wanted to have to face Chewie, not without knowing where he stood. So he asked, "How'd you know Chewie took the *Falcon*?"

"The commandant told me."

"Did he -- uh -- tell you anything else?"

Leia gave him a bland, innocent look. "What else could he have told me?"

Han didn't trust that look for a minute, but he didn't want to press for more details either. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get going. I'll be a lot happier once I get my ship back." *And a few things settled*, he added silently.

Leia looked at him thoughtfully but didn't comment.

* * *

The *Starbird* proved to be a small passenger yacht, not as fast as the *Falcon* but a lot fancier. "The privileges of royalty, eh?" he asked, eyeing the obvious luxury with a sour expression.

"As it happens, it was all that was available. We use it for diplomatic missions."

"You mean it's not your own private yacht ?"

She shook her head. "Quit complaining and quit stalling. I'm not going to fly you into a black hole or anything like that." Her eyes lit up. "You can be my copilot if you like."

"Copilot hell. You're no star pilot, lady. I'll make the jump to light speed, and I don't wanna hear no arguments about it, ok?"

"Chauvanist!" But she didn't argue.

Soon they were in hyperspace on their way to Chewie's home world. If truth were told, Han was more than a little nervous about the upcoming reunion with his copilot. Things like this always found him at a loss for words. Besides, too much was at stake for him to be able to relax. So he paced nervously around the *Starbird's* small elegant lounge until Leia got fed up with him and told him to sit down. He was making her nervous, too.

"What's the matter with you anyway, Han?" she asked. You're acting strange."

"I'm terrified," he said drily. "You still gotta land this thing."

"I'm very good at landing. And don't try to change the subject." The sarcasm left her voice. "Seriously, Han, what's wrong?"

He wasn't used to having her admit to genuine concern for him, but even so, he wasn't ready to tell her what was bothering him. "Nothing," he said. "What could possibly be wrong? I've only spent a couple days in jail -- my idea of real fun and games. I don't have my ship, and I have to trust you to set us down in this space-going pleasure boat. What the hell could be wrong?" And he stormed out of the room.

Leia looked after him, her eyes concerned.

But in spite of Han's skepticism, Leia proved to be capable enough of landing the ship smoothly, a fact that she pointed out with pride. Han ignored her.

"Well," she said to break the silence. "You're the one who's been here before. How do we get to Chewie's house from here?"

That was all he needed. "What do you mean, 'we'?"

"I'd like to see Chewie's family," she told him. "Any objections?"

He had all kinds of them, but none that he could voice. So he said shortly, "All right, let's go then."

* * *

Chewie's house was built in the treetops, as all Wookiee dwellings were, once away from the spaceport. Leia found

'the set-up interesting, but even the strangness and fascination of a new planet was not enough to distract her from the dark cloud that seemed to have settled over Han. He looked so tense that she suspected he would probably jump if she said boo. But when they reached Chewie's home Leia noticed that he squared his shoulders and prepared to face head on whatever was bothering him. She knew more about it than she'd let on as the commandant of the Vestin jail had been a voluble sort, but she was smart enough to refrain from springing her knowledge on Han. Only now, knowing that he must be worried about his reception, she found herself reaching for his hand. For a moment she thought he might reject it, then his fingers tightened around hers, though he gave no other sign that he was even aware of it.

The door opened to reveal Malla, Chewie's wife. She gave Han a look that he couldn't quite interpret, then she smiled at him. Somehow, Han was not reassured.

He said awkwardly, "Hi, Malla. Is Chewie here?"

She stood back to allow him and Leia to enter. Across the room Chewie, who had been sitting and talking to his son Lumpy, rose to his feet and looked at Han without speaking. Then he noticed Leia, growled a greeting and motioned for her to enter too.

Han didn't know what to say, so he said the first thing that he could think of. "I came to pick up the *Falcon*. Leia brought me." It was apparent as soon as he'd said it that he'd stated the obvious and he felt like an idiot. So he plunged on, taking a risk he wasn't sure he was ready for. "Are you ready to go?" he asked Chewie.

And Chewie said clearly, *"No."*

Han just looked at him for a minute, at a loss for words. He'd hoped all along that Chewie would have had time to get over his anger, but it was beginning to look as if he hadn't. Not sure what to do, Han turned to leave.

Then Chewie said quickly, *"We have to celebrate Life Day first."*

Han hesitated. "But that was a couple days ago," he objected. "Didn't you get here on time after all?"

*"I got here on time,"* Chewie confirmed. *"And Life Day is over. But our own family celebration had to wait because the whole family wasn't here."*

"Who was missing?" Han asked, looking around. Everyone seemed to be there. Chewie's father Itchy was sitting across the room. Malla was standing beside Chewie. Closer at hand, Lumpy was practically dancing around in his eagerness to be noticed. "Hi, kid," Han told him, giving him a pat on the head. "Everybody's here," he told Chewie.

*"Now,"* Chewie agreed. *"But it took you long enough to get here."*

Han was absolutely floored. "Me?" he asked. "You mean you waited for me?"

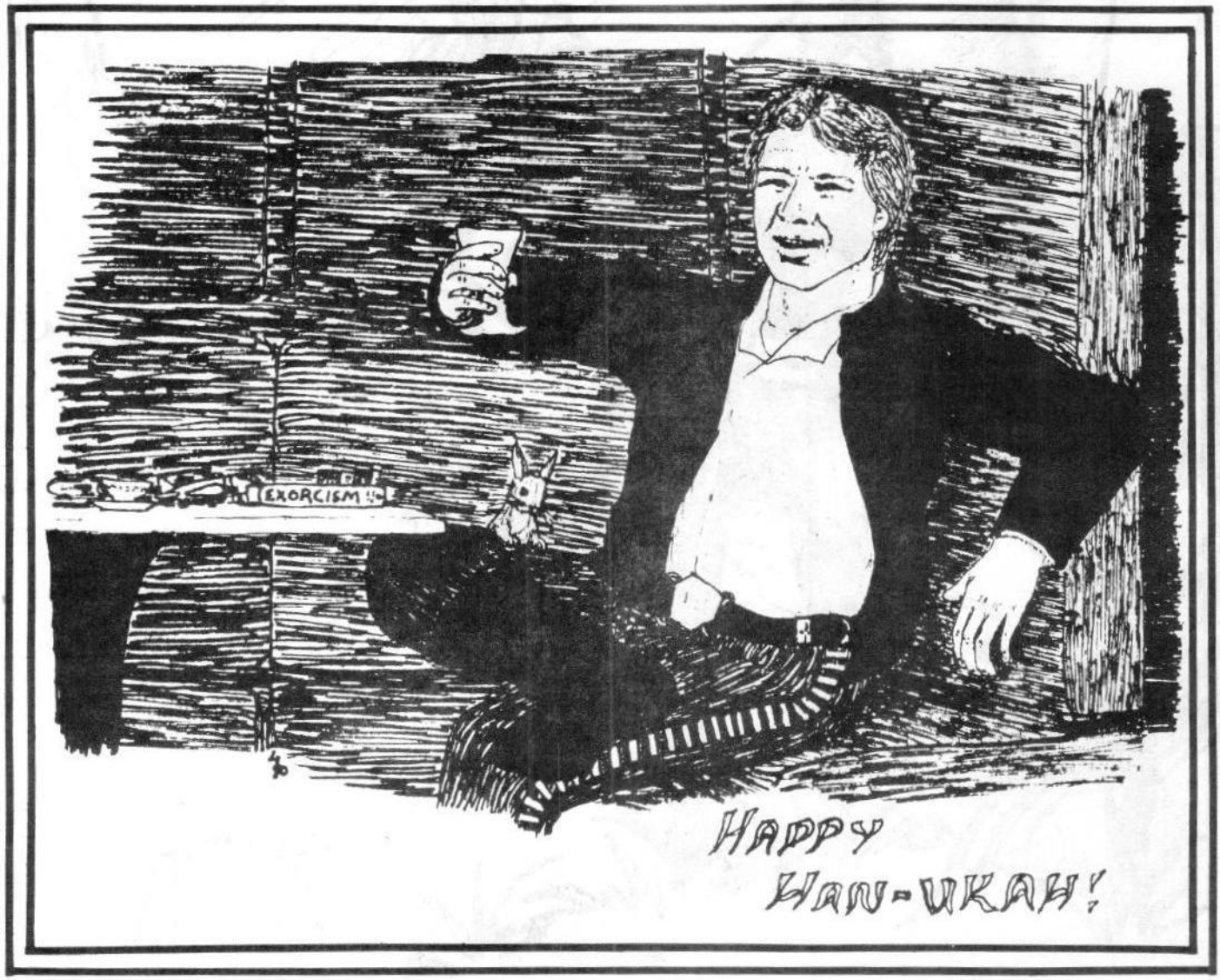
Chewie crossed the room in two quick strides and gave his favorite human a hug that Han didn't resist at all, even though it threatened to cave in all his ribs and suffocate him into the bargain. It was, he thought, a small price to pay to have his world right side up again. For a minute, he just gave in and held on.

When Chewie let him go, Han gave the princess a suspicious look. "You knew about this all along, didn't you?"

"Who, me?" she asked with mock innocence.

"I shoulda known." he grumbled. "First time I ever heard tell of a woman keeping a secret." And he gave her a smile that belied the tone of voice before he turned back to Chewie. "Everything ok, pal?" he asked, just to be sure.

Chewie nodded. *"Welcome home."*



VENOBIA

# Monologue Of A Reluctant Angel

## SHERRY MAGEE

Shee-it!
Damn cinch's loose. Whoa, pony.
Sun's almost up, too.
I figured I'd be miles from here by now.
Can't seem to git started.
It's pretty up here, though.
You can see the ocean and the whole city.
Frisco sure is growin'.
Wasn't no more than a few tents last time I was here.
This country's gettin' too civilized for me,
Good place for Avram, though.
Civilization suits him.
Avram.
Wish I'd told him goodbye 'fore I left,
But hell, he'd try to talk me outta goin'.
Every time I mention it he says,
"Tommy, why does my best friend have to leave?
You could settle here, get a nice job,
Give up all that robbing and running around.
Only a crazy robs banks, and you, my friend, are not crazy ...
Well, maybe a little bit crazy .... "
Don't he understand that I got places to go, people to see,
Banks to rob? Banks ...
Now how can I go back to that?
Every time I think about it I'm gonna hear Avram's 'crazy' lecture.
Keep feelin' like he's lookin' over my shoulder.
Well, there won't be many banks in Sutter's Mill.
The gold fields, that's where I'm headed.
Oughta be plenty o' action there.
Shoulda told him goodbye, though,
He bein' my best friend and all.
Who ever thought I'd have a rabbi for a best friend?
Ain't like he needs me now, not with Rosalie.
Never saw a man so happy to get hitched.
Don't think he's stopped smilin' since the wedding.
Well, he's one lucky fella.
She's a fine lady, no doubt about it.
That reminds me, I'm supposed to eat with them Saturday,
Share the Sabbath.
Now whoever heard of goin' to church on Saturday?
The Jewish people sure have funny ideas.
Guess I ain't the only onw that thinks that way.
I've heard talk like those fellas in the saloon last night.
Don't like Jews at all,
Said they was pushy an' money-grubbin',
Don't know their place.
Probably shouldn'ta hit that one no-'count,
But he made me mad.
Sure they dress funny, talk funny, too,
They got a Torah 'stead of a Bible,
An' they go to church on the wrong day.
So what?
They's just different, no harm in that.
Even ol' man Bender ain't such a bad sort
Once you get past that top hat and his stuffed-shirt ways.
So why's some folks all upset 'cause they's Jewish?
They don't care if I live next to 'em,

An' I don't even go the church.
What'dya think about that, pony?
Sure beats the hell outta me.
Come on, let's git.
Those gold fields ain't gonna last forever.
Strike'll be over 'fore we get there.
Kinda wish I'd said goodbye, though.

Hold up a minute, pony.
What if those townfolks start trouble when I'm not around?
Avram says his people been lookin' for a home a long time,
What if somebody tries to run them out?
They ain't gotta gun between 'em.
Why Avram still ain't got over killin' Darryll Diggs.
I keep tellin' him it was self defense,
But he just looks sad an' won't answer me.
What's gonna happen if those folks start pushin',
Shootin' even?
I'll tell you what Avram's gonna do.
He'll have his stubborn fool neck right out in front
Tryin' to reason with 'em just like he done with the Injuns.
Course, it worked out that time,
Not countin' the peyote, of course,
But city folks ain't as reasonable as some Injuns, neither.
He'll probably git hisself shot, the Mishygoona!
Least I coulda warned him 'fore I left.
Why do I keep feelin' responsible for him?
I ain't never been responsible for nobody 'cept me.
You'd think I was his guardian or something.
Crazy notion.
Thought I got over that when I sobered up.
Still, he does take some lookin' after.
There's nothin' for it but to go back.
Better than standin' here turnin' west, then east, then west.
'Sides, I can always leave in a day or two
After I have a talk with Avram,
An' look around to see that things is alright.
Gold fields'll be there.
Git around there, pony,
We're headed back.
Shee-it!
This havin' responsibilities is sure hard on a man!

# Solo the Pirate Pilot

Meg Garrett

*tune: "Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer"*

Solo the pirate pilot,
Had a lot of smuggled spice,
And if he ever sells it,
It would bring a first-class price.
All of the Empire's troopers
Looked for him most every place.
They couldn't find Han Solo --
He knew how to hide in space!

Then one day in hyperspace,
Solo came to grief --
From the sky the troopers fell --
He dumped the spice and ran like hell!

Now Jabba tries to kill him
Every time he cannot pay,
But Solo, the pirate pilot
Always seems to get away!

# HANCICLE

AVAILABLE FROM YOUR
SICK HUMOR MAN.